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Before You Read...

Oh mah goodness...

^That's what I had typed as a placeholder for this section when I first created this book a few months ago, but it honestly captures exactly how I'm feeling right now...

OH MAH GOODNESS, we're on freaking book six! How wild is that!?

I think I've said this for every book before this, but if you've made it this far, I seriously cannot thank you enough for your support. I really hope that you enjoyed the first five books of this series, and I hope that you enjoy this last one!

Speaking of that, the fact that this is the last book of my fanfiction "arc" hasn't even hit me yet (and I'm not sure if I want it to), but it's very much been a long time coming! Years ago I actually thought I was going to stop after three books, but after I saw how much readers enjoyed it, along with how much I enjoyed WRITING it, I knew that I had to continue. I am SO thankful that I have.

Anyway, I don't want to bore you before you even start the book, so I'll save the sappiness for the ending Author's Note (oh, boy). I really hope that you enjoy this final book of my fanfiction series - Warriors: Kittypet Clanborn!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

P.S. I am using original characters and plotlines from the canon Warrior Cats series, but I am NOT claiming them as my own - they all belong to Erin Hunter! The only things that belong to me are my OCs! :) <3

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER Firestar—ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt
DEPUTY Brambleclaw—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
MEDICINE CAT Jayfeather—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

WARRIORS (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Graystripe—long-haired gray tom

Dustpelt—dark brown tabby tom

Sandstorm—pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Brackenfur—golden brown tabby tom

Sorreltail—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Cloudtail—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

Brightheart—white she-cat with ginger patches

Millie—striped gray tabby she-cat

Thornclaw—golden brown tabby tom

Squirrelflight—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

Leafpool—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, former medicine cat

Goldenshine—golden brown tabby she-cat with gray eyes
Apprentice, Cherrypaw

Swiftflight—dark gray tom (with a white chest and paws) with gray-blue eyes

Snowstorm—white she-cat (with gray ears and paws) with blue

eyes

Dustystorm—gray tom (with light gray flecks) and pale blue eyes

Nightwing—sleek black she-cat with green eyes

Spiderleg—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

Birchfall—light brown tabby tom

Whitewing—white she-cat with green eyes

Berrynose—cream-colored tom

Poppyfrost—tortoiseshell she-cat

Hazeltail—small gray-and-white she-cat

Mousewhisker—gray-and-white tom

Hollyleaf—black she-cat with green eyes

Cinderheart—gray tabby she-cat

Lionblaze—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Foxleap—reddish tabby tom

Icecloud—white she-cat

Toadstep—black-and-white tom

Rosepetal—dark cream she-cat
Apprentice, Molepaw

Briarlight—dark brown she-cat

Blossomfall—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Bumblestripe—very pale gray tom with black stripes

Dovewing—pale gray she-cat with green eyes

Ivypool—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

APPRENTICES (more than six moons old, training to become warriors)

Cherrypaw—ginger tabby she-cat

Molepaw—brown-and-cream tom

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Ferncloud—pale gray (with darker flecks) she-cat with green eyes

Lilypetal—brown tabby-and-white she-cat with hazel eyes (mother to Wrenkit, a brown tabby tom with pale blue eyes; Lightningkit, a black tom with white paws and chest and yellow eyes; and Emberkit, a golden tabby-and-white she-cat with hazel eyes)

Daisy—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Mousefur—small dusky brown she-cat

Purdy—plump tabby former loner with a gray muzzle

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER Blackstar—large white tom with huge jet-black paws
DEPUTY Rowanclaw—ginger tom
MEDICINE CAT(S) Littlecloud—very small tabby tom

WARRIORS

Oakfur—small brown tom
Apprentice, Ferretpaw (cream-and-gray tom)

Smokefoot—black tom

Toadfoot—dark brown tom

Applefur—mottled brown she-cat

Crowfrost—black-and-white tom

Ratscar—brown tom with long scar across his back
Apprentice, Pinepaw (black she-cat)

Snowbird—pure-white she-cat

Tawnypelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Starlingpaw (ginger tom)

Olivenose—tortoiseshell she-cat

Owlclaw—light brown tabby tom

Shrewfoot—gray she-cat with black feet

Scorchfur—dark gray tom

Redwillow—mottled brown-and-ginger tom

Tigerheart—dark brown tabby tom

Dawnpelt—cream-furred she-cat

QUEENS

Kinkfur—tabby she-cat, with long fur that sticks out at all angles

Ivytail—black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat

ELDERS

Cedarheart—dark gray tom

Tallpoppy—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

Snaketail—dark brown tom with a tabby-striped tail

Whitewater—white she cat with long fur, blind in one eye

WINDCLAN

LEADER Onestar—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY Ashfoot—gray she-cat
MEDICINE CAT Kestrelflight—mottled gray tom

WARRIORS

Crowfeather—dark gray tom

Owlwhisker—light brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Whiskerpaw (light brown tom)

Whitetail—small white she-cat

Nightcloud—black she-cat

Gorsetail—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

Weaselfur—ginger tom with white paws

Harespring—brown-and-white tom

Leaftail—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Antpelt—brown tom with one black ear

Emberfoot—gray tom with two dark paws

Heathertail—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Furzepaw (gray-and-white she-cat)

Breezepelt—black tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Boulderpaw (large pale gray tom)

Sedgewhisker—light brown tabby she-cat

Swallowtail—dark gray she-cat

Sunstrike—tortoiseshell she-cat with large white mark on her forehead

ELDERS

Webfoot—dark gray tabby tom

Tornear—tabby tom

RIVERCLAN

LEADER Mistystar—gray she-cat with blue eyes
DEPUTY Reedwhisker—black tom
Apprentice, Hollowpaw (dark brown tabby tom)
MEDICINE CAT(S) Mothwing—dappled golden she-cat
Apprentice, Willowshine (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

Graymist—pale gray tabby she-cat
Apprentice, Troutpaw (pale gray tabby she-cat)

Mintfur—light gray tabby tom

Icewing—white she-cat with blue eyes

Minnowtail—dark gray she-cat
Apprentice, Mossypaw (brown-and-cream she-cat)

Pebblefoot—mottled gray tom
Apprentice, Rushpaw (light brown tabby tom)

Mallownose—light brown tabby tom

Robinwing—tortoiseshell-and-white tom

Beetlewhisker—brown-and-white tabby tom

Petalfur—gray-and-white she-cat

Grasspelt—light brown tom

QUEENS

Duskfur—brown tabby she-cat

Mosspelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

ELDERS

Dapplenose—mottled gray she-cat

Pouncetail—ginger-and-white tom

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS

Smoky—muscular gray-and-white tom who lives in a barn at the horseplace

Floss—small gray-and-white she-cat who lives at the horseplace

Oreo—black and white tom with hazel eyes

OTHER ANIMALS

Midnight—a star-gazing badger who lives by the sea

Prologue

[image]

Everything was quiet except for the soft ripples of the small pond that glittered beneath the tall oak trees. There wasn't even the slightest blow of the wind that would cause the leaves or grass to shake. And although the sky was dark, the stars seemed to shimmer as brightly as even the most radiant greenleaf sun.

The stillness and silence were suddenly broken as a blue-gray figure emerged into this clearing through the bushes, their shadow looming over the pool. The she-cat sighed, furrowing her eyebrows and narrowing her eyes as she stared down into the water, images of a home she had never actually called her own reflected beneath the water.

The cat was so immersed into her study of the pool that she barely flinched when another rustle came from the shrubs behind her. She didn't even avert her gaze as another cat settled down beside her.

The older, more ruffled-looking she-cat let out an amused snort. "Hm, checking up on your old Clanmates again, Bluestar?"

Bluestar let out a huff, finally turning to look at the cat next to her. "I very well think that I should be, Yellowfang," the blue-gray she-cat muttered in reply before returning her gaze to the pool. "The four Clans haven't been living here by the lake for very long, and they've already experienced their fair share of adversity in just a few moons."

"Sure," Yellowfang murmured, shrugging. "But since the badger attack, I don't think I've seen even a mouse tail's amount of danger lurking down there."

Both she-cats looked up as yet another figure appeared into view, a white tom. His yellow eyes were gleaming with humor. "Ah, Yellowfang. You've always been one to settle," he purred as he sat down on Bluestar's other side. "Come on, there's no harm in taking a

glance, is there?"

"Always the voice of reason, Whitestorm," Bluestar meowed, lightly nudging her kin as she continued to look over the territories where ThunderClan, ShadowClan, WindClan and RiverClan presided, and had been since their old forest territory had been destroyed by Twolegs and their monsters.

To Bluestar's relief, the lake looked peaceful, just as Yellowfang had pointed out. She hadn't even spotted anything as minor as a border skirmish in the past moon. But things were *that* peaceful that a twinge of anxiety touched Bluestar every time she thought about it. She wondered how long it would last. *Whitestorm is right*, the old ThunderClan leader told herself. *There's no harm in checking.*

Bluestar's gaze had been immersed on a tawny-colored squirrel quickly making its way up an oak tree when she felt Yellowfang tap her shoulder with her tail. "Look there," the old she-cat meowed, nodding her head towards the greenleaf Twoleg nest that lied just a little ways away from ThunderClan's territory.

Bluestar shifted her gaze as Yellowfang had commanded, and she noticed a petite figure emerge from this nest - a tabby-and-white she-cat. Once her paws settled onto grass, she slowly stretched out and shook out her fur, clearly enjoying the brightness and heat of the sun.

Yellowfang let out another amused grunt beside Bluestar. "It appears that another kittypet has come to visit," she murmured, her eyes following the housecat as she then padded through the yard. "Lovely."

This wasn't a surprise at all to Bluestar, for housefolk staying by the lake was nothing new. Most of the time, these Twolegs would even bring their dogs or cats with them. *Sometimes resulting in something else for the Clans to worry about...* Bluestar realized, beginning to watch as the kittypet then leaped up to the top of her fence. To the StarClan cat's surprise, this cat didn't seem to be staring fearfully into the forest as most housecats did. Rather, her gaze seemed contemplative and curious as she stared up at the trees and out towards the lake.

Whitestorm seemed to notice this as well, and let out an intrigued grunt. Bluestar glanced at the tom to see that his eyes were also on the young she-cat, his eyes narrowed. "Hm, I rarely see a kittypet doing that," he murmured. "You'd think she was staring at a new toy her Twoleg got for her."

"She's fit for a housecat," Yellowfang commented.

"Pretty eyes," Bluestar murmured, trying to further analyze the deep look in the kittypet's gaze. It was a look she had only seen in a couple of kittypets before, and she couldn't help but recall how things had gone for them.

And it was pretty obvious to Bluestar that this cat had established this overlook spot on her fence long ago. After her stretch, she had rushed up to that fence as if her life depended on it. *She clearly feels some tug away from what she knows,* Bluestar concluded, understanding this feeling from kittypets all too well.

She then flicked her ears as the tabby-and-white she-cat finally broke her gaze from the forest, her captivating eyes narrowing as they fell back on her nest. After a few heartbeats, she then turned back to the forest... and then back to her nest again.

Bluestar had assumed that she was the only one engrossed by this she-cat's strange actions, but after just a quick glance on each of her sides, she could easily sense her fellow StarClan cats' curiosity by their twitching whiskers and wide eyes.

"She looks torn, doesn't she?" Whitestorm whispered, seemingly half to himself.

Yellowfang sniffed, lashing her fluffy gray tail. "Torn between what? Staying there or *leaving* her Twolegs?" the old medicine cat purred. "Yeah, right."

Bluestar raised a single eyebrow as the kittypet then leaped down from the fence. "I wouldn't speak so soon, Yellowfang," Bluestar meowed, nodding to the cat as she landed in the grass opposite of her yard. The ThunderClan leader then couldn't help but quietly purr with amusement as the she-cat took a deep breath and began

to walk into the forest, her head held high.

Whitestorm sniffed beside Bluestar. "She's got spirit," he meowed, laughter in his voice as his gaze followed the she-cat padding deeper into the trees.

"I have to admit, she reminds me of someone," Yellowfang croaked, echoing Bluestar's earlier thoughts.

As Bluestar looked further into the forest, she couldn't help but feel a pang of fear as she noticed a ThunderClan patrol not too far away from where the housecat was wandering. This patrol, consisting of many cats that Bluestar had known in her time, were slowly padding through the forest, their muzzles up and mouths open.

Squirrelflight, who was flanking Brambleclaw at the front, paused, flicking her ears as she seemed to catch wind of something. The dark ginger she-cat stopped in her tracks and raised her tail as a signal for the traveling cats to pause.

"Hold on," she hissed quietly, her green eyes narrowing. "Do you all smell that?"

Sandstorm, who was traveling just behind her daughter, stopped as well and gaped her mouth. After just a heartbeat, the sandy she-cat seemed to be suppressing a hiss. "Kittypet," she muttered. "Fresh, too."

Graystripe snorted with amusement as he padded up to stand by Sandstorm. "A kittypet? Well, there's probably no harm there, then," the gray tom commented. "Just leave it be."

An angry hiss from Spiderleg interrupted anything that Graystripe could have said next. "*Leave* it *be*?" the tom repeated in a growl. "It's invading our territory! We need to chase out that nuisance!"

By the gleam of determination in Squirrelflight's eyes, Bluestar could tell that the young warrior was going to do just that. After giving a small nod to Brambleclaw, she then began to trot excitedly ahead.

But her mate immediately chased after her, barely managing to

touch her flank with his tail. "Wait!" the brown tabby tom called out to her. "Surely you need someone else to come with you?"

Squirrelflight groaned and rolled her eyes at the ThunderClan deputy's words. "For StarClan's sake, it's a kittypet, not a fox!" she demanded, and without waiting for Brambleclaw's reply, she pelted off into the forest once again. "I'll be right back!"

Bluestar didn't break her attention away from the scene unfolding before her despite hearing Yellowfang murmur next to her. "Hm, this usually doesn't end very well."

Bluestar didn't reply, and simply watched as Squirrelflight very quickly made her way towards the spot where the mystery kittypet was wandering. The cat's eyes were flitting every which way, yet Bluestar was sure that any warrior could easily take her by surprise.

So she was surprised to suddenly see the kittypet's ears flick, and her eyes abruptly break away from the trees. *She smells Squirrelflight*, Bluestar realized. She then managed to further be surprised as the cat continued to walk through the forest, despite how nervous she clearly was.

She then paused again as Squirrelflight rustled a bush, revealing to this kittypet that she was there.

"Who's there?" the young she-cat then called out, her claws sinking into the ground. It appeared as if her fear had now locked her into place, giving Squirrelflight the perfect opportunity to make her move.

And sure enough, Squirrelflight took advantage of the kittypet's shock and swiftly leaped from the bushes, landing on the she-cat's back and sinking her claws into her shoulders. The kittypet let out a yowl of pain as her eyes flashed with panic.

Bluestar watched in amazement. It was so similar to something she had also happened to witness so many moons ago. *I wonder how differently this will go...*

Below Squirrelflight and her fiery gaze, Bluestar observed in awe as

the kittypet almost immediately crouched low and began to spin violently around. Her eyes were still glazed over with fear, yet Bluestar could tell that she was certain of what she was doing.

Bluestar actually heard Yellowfang let out a quiet gasp beside her as the she-cat actually managed to toss Squirrelflight off of her, resulting in the young warrior being airborne for just a moment before landing into some bushes. The kittypet whirled around to face her opponent, her eyes wide as she watched Squirrelflight quickly get to her paws again.

Bluestar's eyes narrowed at this sight. *She was ready.* But to her luck, Squirrelflight didn't make any more advances, simply staring back at the she-cat, her green eyes blazing.

But that tension only lasted for a moment, as just heartbeats later, the two she-cats actually fell deep into conversation, to Bluestar's bewilderment. Squirrelflight had seemed to be able to open up pretty easily to this very bold stranger, Bluestar realized. She then could hear this "bold stranger" introduce herself as *Lily.*

Yellowfang let out an annoyed huff as she watched the cats converse. "I'm sure that her father would really enjoy seeing her make friends with intruders," she muttered condescendingly.

Bluestar simply raised her tail for silence and exchanged a fascinated glance with Whitestorm before listening in once again. Now, Squirrelflight seemed to be explaining the concept of the Clans to this kittypet as she stared back, looking utterly enamored by every word that the warrior said.

Bluestar couldn't help but feel a small twinge of pride, seeing an outsider looking so interested in the Clans. *I wonder if she has heard of us before?* This strange cat wasn't only listening, but she was asking questions, clearly wanting to know more. Bluestar could only assume that she had - her eyes were filled with so much awe and fascination as she listened to Squirrelflight.

"Uh, oh," Whitestorm hissed, cutting Bluestar off from her thoughts. She looked back at her kin to see that he was staring off at something off to the side of the pool. "It looks like the patrol has

tracked them down."

Bluestar followed the white tom's gaze to see Brambleclaw, Sandstorm, Graystripe and Spiderleg making their way into the clearing that Squirrelflight and Lily were sitting in.

Bluestar exchanged another glance with Whitestorm, and then with Yellowfang. *Let's see how she'll handle a whole group of wild cats...*

The three StarClan cats watched, captivated, as Brambleclaw seemed to immediately question why Squirrelflight had settled down with a complete stranger. And shockingly, Squirrelflight immediately came to Lily's defense. *Unfortunately for Spiderleg...* Bluestar thought humoredly as he watched the black and brown warrior roll his eyes and lash his tail irritably.

After a bit more of back and forth, the patrol of cats finally seemed to decide that this "Lily" wasn't going to bring them any harm. Brambleclaw beckoned Squirrelflight with his tail, and the ginger she-cat seemed to call out a farewell to the kittypet, her eyes actually revealing reluctance at having to leave her.

And shockingly, Lily's eyes reflected the exact same thing. Just heartbeats after the ThunderClan patrol had turned around, she took a step forward and called out for them to wait.

Bluestar let out an intrigued, surprised grunt as Lily then proceeded to ask, "Can I come with you to your Clan?"

Bluestar herself actually found that she was disappointed to see that the cats looked hesitant as they turned around to face Lily. But they seemed to listen intently as Squirrelflight assisted the kittypet in convincing them to let Lily return to camp with them.

Lily's gaze then reflected Bluestar's own satisfaction as Brambleclaw finally agreed to let her have a look around.

"Wow," Yellowfang whispered. "You'd think a cat had just told her she's getting all of the cat food pellets in the world."

I wouldn't be making kittypet metaphors anymore... Bluestar said in her mind as she watched Lily excitedly pad side by side with

Squirrelflight deeper into ThunderClan territory.

A chill then nearly ran down Bluestar's spine as she watched Lily fall back for just a moment, turning her head to look back towards her Twoleg nest, her eyes narrowed. Then, after a few heartbeats, she turned back towards the forest, her eyes lightening as if the sun had directly shined into them, before quickly running up to catch up with the patrol.

"Well, I certainly don't think that this is any ordinary kittypet that we've stumbled on," Yellowfang meowed as she watched the ThunderClan patrol travel.

Whitestorm, who had been fairly silent as he had watched the pool with Bluestar and Yellowfang, nodded in agreement at Yellowfang's words, but Bluestar noticed that his yellow eyes seemed to reveal more. "Well, sure," he purred. "I'm surprised you all didn't realize that as soon as you saw her."

Both Bluestar and Yellowfang turned to look at Whitestorm, their eyes narrowed with curiosity at the complexity of his words.

Whitestorm stood up, his eyes gleaming as he meowed, "Lily has no idea, but she's already been a ThunderClan cat," he replied, picking up Bluestar and Yellowfang's confusion. "This is Mistpelt's kit - the she-cat from the Twolegplace who joined ThunderClan just before the battle with BloodClan."

While Bluestar stared back at Whitestorm, bewildered by his words, Yellowfang let out another snort. "A kittypet with a warrior's past," she murmured, shaking her head slowly. "What a waste."

"Not anymore," Bluestar immediately replied, her eyes falling back on the brown tabby-and-white pelt of Lily as she trotted eagerly through the forest.

"What do you mean, Bluestar?" Whitestorm questioned, following the gray she-cat's gaze. "Do you think that she's there to stay?"

Bluestar didn't even need one moment to think about that answer; she had seen enough already. "I have no doubt," she answered.

"There was something in that she-cat's eyes - I've seen it before. She has quite the journey ahead of her."

Yellowfang sniffed, clearly humored as she broke her gaze to look at the ThunderClan leader. "How original, Bluestar," she taunted sarcastically. "Doesn't every cat?"

Bluestar sighed before meeting the old medicine cat's gaze. "Yellowfang, you know that I wouldn't say something like this lightly," the gray she-cat responded, hardening her meow. She then took one last glance into the pool as she murmured, "She is going to be a cat that through her spirit, determination and actions, many cats will come to admire."

Chapter 1

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Slam!

My eyes shot open, and I flinched with alarm at the loud noise that had woken me up. *What in the name of StarClan was that?*

I quickly lifted my head and scanned the area, and nearly hissed as I almost immediately noticed the Twoleg looming over my... *cat bed?*

I barely paid the Twoleg any mind as it then started to pet me; I was too busy trying to contain my confusion and shock. *This again?* I thought irritably as my Twoleg's clammy, furless paw finally pulled away from me and I was able to stand up.

I let out a long sigh, my paws suddenly not feeling comfortable or familiar pressed on the cold, hard ground as I padded up to my pink food bowl and bent down to eat. I didn't want to, not one bit. But I was dreaming, I knew it. Although I knew I had full control of my actions, I felt like I was being tugged every which way at the same time.

Which means that I have to eat these StarClan-cursed pellets again, I thought humoredly, forcing down my last mouthful. I shook my head almost as a coping mechanism to get through the horrid taste. *Even if Clan life hadn't ended up being for me, their meals never cease to fail.*

I then continued to try to ignore my tugging bewilderment as I began to wander around the kitchen - the room I had stayed in most as a kittypet because it was nearest to the back door that led outside.

So, when I noticed the large hindpaws of one of my Twolegs begin

to travel towards the door, I couldn't help but jump up with excitement and lightly bat at them with my paws. *Please, please, you furless giant! Open that darned door!* I begged in my mind. *Let me out of here!*

Something I had actually respected about my Twolegs was the fact that they actually had the ability to take a hint. After the Twoleg gave me one last stroke on my head with one of their paws, I heard the click of the doorknob, and I nearly cried out with triumph as I saw daylight through the crack of the wooden plank.

I slithered through the door and outside as quickly as I could, so thankful to feel the softness of grass beneath my paws again. But after a few heartbeats, I let out an exasperated sigh and looked back at the now-closed door. I had never thought that I'd see the day where I'd have to make that escape again.

I then urgently began to trot through the yard until I made it to the tall white fence, something that actually gave me a bit of ease. It was my means of escape, that's why.

I let out a small purr before leaping up and swiftly landing at the top of the fence. If anything was going to get me through this dream, it would be at least one glance out into the forest.

But as soon as I was able to process what was in front of me, my stomach twisted up into a knot.

I had expected to see a forest, and a forest I got... but it wasn't the bright, striking, beautiful, seemingly never-ending forest that I had always known.

It was almost as if this forest represented the cutoff between night and day; It was perfectly sunny and warm from where I sat on the fence, but out in the forest it was dark. Very dark. It was almost as if sunlight was forbidden to bleed through its trees. *Creepy... really, really creepy.*

It was ominous, that's for sure. But nevertheless, my curiosity got the best of me, and I leaped down onto the other side of the fence and began to pad ahead without one look back at my Twoleg nest.

The forest was even more dreadful and unsettling from the inside than it had appeared from the outside. It did appear as if it was nighttime here, but there weren't any stars or moon in sight. All of the grass around was dry and dead, and all of the brambles seemed to carry large, sharp thorns. Not one creature was in sight.

I hated to admit to myself that this place was familiar to me. I'd been here only twice, but that had been more than enough.

I was quite nervous, but I continued to travel further into the forest. I was sure that my Twoleg nest was far behind me now.

Each pawstep I took felt like an eternity, and I almost felt like I could hear my heart beating it my ears. *Well, it is the only thing I can hear right now,* I thought anxiously as I flicked my eyes from side to side. *It's horribly quiet.*

I then stopped in my tracks, my heart beating faster as I heard a rustle of leaves come from up ahead. *Well, never mind.*

I took a deep breath, trying to keep calm as I continued to walk, a bit more slowly now. *It's just a dream*, I relentlessly tried to tell myself. *It's all just a dream. You don't need to be scared.*

I flicked my ears and nearly gasped as I heard another noise, but this time it was much closer. And to my dismay, a scent came with it. *Well... I don't* think *that I need to be scared...*

I then unsheathed my claws and dug them into the ground as I almost thought that I recognized this horrid odor. I couldn't quite touch on it at the moment, but I found that it was further pulling me forward.

The scent was becoming stronger and stronger, and the rustles were becoming more and more abundant the more that I traveled. I was honestly surprised by how little fear I felt at this point, even my surroundings being as unnerving as they were.

After winding my way through a big pile of limbs and branches, I paused once more at yet another rustle. This time, it had come from some brambles right in front of me.

Here, the scent I had been following was as strong as ever.

I bared my teeth, trying to force down the growl that was rising in my throat as I crouched low to the ground. "Who are you?" I actually muttered out loud, half to myself. *I'm not afraid... I'm not afraid...*

I then let out a startled hiss as something new caught my eye. Within the shadows of the brambles and bushes in front of me, I could just barely see two narrowed eyes staring back at me, blazing with malice.

And would you look at that, I thought as I actually began to growl and unsheathe my claws once again. *They're my favorite color, too.*

Blue eyes.

It didn't take me much deductive reasoning to know who was staring back at me through those bushes.

As a strong wave of rage rushed through me, I leaped forward out of my crouching position, and I actually managed to feel a twinge of satisfaction as my claws met fur.

"You!" I barked as I began to rake my claws down the fox-heart's flank. "I'm going to rip you to shreds for all you've taken away from me, you piece of crowfood!"

"Lilypetal!"

I ignored the voice that echoed in my ear. "No! You don't get to 'Lilypetal' me!" I hissed in the gray-speckled tom's ear. "This is what you deserve!"

"Lilypetal! Wake up!"

Just as I had begun to realize that it wasn't Ashfur's horrible, mocking voice that was calling out to me, my eyes shot open once again, but this time I was in my current home.

"Lilypetal?"

My heart nearly skipped a beat as I was startled by the hushed meow that I heard, but I immediately let out a sigh of relief as I turned around the see the wide, concerned pale blue eyes of my mate, Thornclaw.

As soon as my gaze had locked with his, he let out a small purr of amusement and brushed his tail along my flank. "Are you alright?" he whispered as he watched me try and catch my breath. "You were dreaming."

I wasn't able to speak for a few heartbeats as I still seemed to be making my way to full consciousness. I looked up to see that small beams of moonlight were making their way through the cracks of the nursery den as I panted and blinked my eyes open and closed a few times, having to remind myself all over again that everything that I had just experienced was only a dream. *Thornclaw is right. It was all a dream,* I told myself as I took a deep breath. *So why don't I feel satisfied?*

I shook my head slowly as I finally turned my head to look at Thornclaw once again. I touched noses with my mate as I finally answered him. "Yes, I'm alright. Just a bit shaken," I whispered. I then let out a long sigh as I continued to shake my head slowly. "Great StarClan, I was dreaming like that again? I'm so, so sorry."

Thornclaw shifted himself closer to me and touched his muzzle to my cheek. "It's okay. Don't worry about it," he reassured me before pulling away to meet my gaze again. His eyes looked worried. "This is the third night that I've had to wake you up like this," he then admitted, a bit of laughter in his voice. "Tonight you actually took out a bit of our nest."

I flicked my ears and gasped. "What?" I nearly exclaimed before whipping my head around to find a small clump of moss lying just a few tail-lengths away. It was misshapen and lumpy - definitely not one of the pieces the kits would play mossball with.

I let out another sigh as looked back at my mate. "Oh my goodness, I am *so* sorry," I repeated, my heart welling up with guilt. *My dreams have been depriving Thornclaw of sleep for three nights now, that's not fair to him at all!* "I'm... I'm sorry, Thornclaw."

"Stop apologizing," Thornclaw purred, his warm gaze burning into mine. "It's not your fault."

I then sighed once again and closed my eyes, actually being reassured by my mate's words. "I suppose not," I whispered, licking my mate's cheek before sniffing and glancing down at our mossy bed. "But I'd like to refrain from shredding our own nest. I think we can both agree that *that* was my fault." My voice actually managed to be full of laughter as I spoke.

Thornclaw was purring with amusement as well. "Hey, it's kind of fun, actually," he replied. "We can see how many nights it takes you until you tear it into nothingness."

"Very funny," I murmured, flashing my mate an amused look before looking urgently down at my flank, glancing at each of the three bundles that were there. "Did I wake up the kits?"

"They didn't even bat an eye," Thornclaw answered, peering over my flank to get a look at Lightningkit, Wrenkit and Emberkit, who were curled up and pressed against me. "You know that they've been sleeping like opossums for days now - not even a Twoleg monster growling outside of the den could wake them up."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Good," I breathed, lying my head on Thornclaw's shoulder and pressing myself against him. I then pulled my kits in closer with my tail, which had become significantly harder from how big they were getting.

I then closed my eyes, not to go back to sleep, but rather to reflect on what the heck had just happened. Thornclaw's words had reassured me quite a bit, but I couldn't help but still be frustrated by how my dreams were affecting me.

As he had said, this was now the third night that I had been experiencing these type of dreams - ones that caused my mate to have to wake me up in order to keep me from hissing out loud or clawing at the air.

And all three dreams had been very similar to what I had just experienced tonight, the only differences in the others being that

maybe I began in the forest rather than in my Twoleg nest, or I was woken up before I could even make my leap towards the cat I saw.

Either way, I didn't like them. They always left me feeling antsy, angry, nervous, and everything in between.

I let out a small huff as I then opened my eyes again, and I looked up at Thornclaw to see that he was staring right back down at me. I couldn't help but purr as the softness of his gaze. *He manages to get more handsome and adorable each time I look at him, if that's even possible.*

"Hey," he then began, breaking his gaze to nod towards the entrance of the nursery. "How about we go on one of our walks?"

I raised my eyebrows at my mate. "Right now?" I questioned as I lashed my tail. "It's in the middle of the night!"

Thornclaw simply shrugged. "And?"

"Well... what about the kits?" I meowed, actually purring from how outrageous Thornclaw's proposition sounded.

"My former comment still stands," Thornclaw replied as he flicked Lightningkit's ear with his golden tabby tail. "And these three are old enough to know to stay put by now. And if one of them gets any ideas, I'm sure Wrenkit will try and talk some sense into them."

"You're not wrong about that," I murmured, looking lovingly down at our second litter. *And since...* things *have happened, I genuinely think that Emberkit, Wrenkit and Lightningkit have learned what happens when you leave camp without permission.*

A small shiver ran down my spine as certain bad memories resurfaced, but I pushed them down ruthlessly and thought about Thornclaw's offer. After a few heartbeats, I turned back to my mate and gave him a definitive nod. "Alright, let's go."

Thornclaw nodded back to me. "Okay," he whispered, before stepping aside and letting me leave the den first. And after the two of us exchanged a warm glance, we traveled quietly through the camp, fully aware that everyone else around us was fast asleep.

As we then padded through the camp entrance, we gave a nod in greeting to Nightwing who was on guard before making our way out into the forest.

Almost immediately after we left the camp behind us, I felt another tug of worry and quickened my pace to walk side by side with Thornclaw. "Are you sure that the kits will be alright?" I couldn't help but ask.

Thornclaw turned to meet my gaze. "I actually am, Lilypetal. Daisy, Sorreltail and Ferncloud are in there with them, and Nightwing has been directed to keep an extra close eye out for anything that might happen."

And unfortunately I know what events caused that rule... I thought solemnly as I nodded at Thornclaw's words.

"And I'd hope that they'd behave, anyway," my mate continued, snorting. "They're going to be apprentices any day now."

I felt my heart sink a little as those words processed. "My goodness, our second litter... *apprentices*," I breathed, trying to push down my sadness.

"I can hardly believe it, either," Thornclaw purred as he exchanged a bittersweet glance with me. "But they're ready. I know they are."

"I agree. We created three fantastic little bundles," I purred back before feeling my heart break a little more. *Not so little anymore...* "But nevertheless, maybe we should still hurry, just in case."

Thornclaw sighed as he looked at me warmly. "Alright, we'll go back in just a little while," he meowed as he flicked my ear with his tail. "But not right now - I really think that you need this walk, Lilypetal."

I let out a teasing, exaggerated sigh. "Alright, alright," I conceded, then looking up at the night sky and stepping closer to Thornclaw so that our fur brushed. "It is a really beautiful night." *And it's nice to be in a night forest that actually has moonlight and Silverpelt above it!*

"And we're actually getting some time alone," Thornclaw meowed,

licking my cheek. "That hasn't happened much since the kits were born."

I purred as I nuzzled my mate's neck fur. "Definitely not," I replied before sighing yet again, but it was another one of relief, and not distress. *Thornclaw was right,* I thought happily as we continued to walk side by side through the forest. *I needed this walk a lot. Great StarClan, how does one get so considerate?*

I turned to look at my mate once again, my heart welling up with love. "Hey," I whispered. And once Thornclaw had returned the gaze, I pressed my muzzle against his. "You're sweet."

I pulled away to see that Thornclaw's pale blue eyes were filled with love and humor. "I tend to be," he murmured smugly before twinning his tail with mine.

After I purred with amusement, we then proceeded to walk in silence for a bit, simply enjoying each other's company and listening to all of the moonhigh creatures that stirred. Everything around us was so beautiful - the most horrible leaf-bare resulting in maybe one of the most gorgeous newleafs I had seen since I'd been a Clan cat.

I briefly glanced down at the ground to look at all of the different herbs and flowers that were in bloom. *Great StarClan, Jayfeather will definitely have a lot for his stocks!* I thought excitedly.

I then found myself slowing my pace as my eyes fell on a particular plant. One that I actually had contained in my heart for quite a while now.

Lavender. Mistpelt's favorite flower, I thought to myself as I screwed my eyes shut. *Oh, Mistpelt. I miss you more and more every day. Why did this have to happen?*

The immense sadness that I was feeling in my heart was almost immediately replaced by extreme resentment and rage. I sunk my unsheathed claws deep into the ground. *What happened could have been prevented, if not for...*

I shook my head quickly, almost as if to rid of these thoughts, but all of the heartbreak that Ashfur had put me through up until this point had brought me to such a point, that it was very hard. *And killing my daughter was hard enough...* I thought, my heart sinking as I thought about one of my firstborn, Snowflight. *But somehow luring my kits away from camp, and Mistpelt going out to save them...*

I then couldn't help but release a small whimper as I continued to stare at the purple flower that now meant so much to me. But thanks to Swiftflight, who had been the one to tell me of Ashfur's latest antics, I couldn't help but feel angry every time I looked at them.

Thornclaw clearly sensed this, as I felt him press himself against me, and I turned to see that his eyes were sympathetic, but they also reflected all of the anger and hurt that I felt as well.

"Come on," he meowed softly after a few heartbeats, gently prompting me on with his tail as he began to pad away from the clump of flowers. "Let's get a drink of water from the stream, okay?"

Almost thankful to have a distraction, I immediately shut my eyes and turned away from the lavender before quickly following after Thornclaw.

But as it did each time my heartbreak and anger resurfaced, it didn't go away immediately. I ran up to flank Thornclaw once again, then taking once last glance at the flowers we had left behind.

I then turned away from them for the final time, trying to replace the rage burning inside of me with the determination that always followed. As much as I am living my life to the fullest the best I can, I don't know how much longer I can go on, fearful in the anticipation of what Ashfur could possibly do next, I realized as I pressed comfortingly against Thornclaw.

I then reflected on the meeting that me, Thornclaw, Goldenshine and Swiftflight had had just a few days ago, where so many secrets and plans had been revealed - Snowstorm's identity, Swiftflight's time in the Dark Forest and his escape from it, and a lot more along with that.

As scary and daunting as it had been, it also gave strangest kind of reassurance. Ashfur was becoming stronger; the Dark Forest was becoming stronger - but that meant we were closer to finding a means to defeat them once and for all.

Soon, I told myself as I bent down to lick at the water flowing in the stream. I then shook out my fur and stared down at my reflection in the water. I was almost startled by the burning determination in my own eyes. *Soon.*

Chapter 2

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I let out a yowl, almost to release the adrenaline and excitement bubbling up inside of me as I pelted through the forest, my fur being blown back by the breeze, and my paws only lightly touching the ground with each step I took.

I briefly looked over my shoulder to glance at the sandy-gray tom that was running just behind me. "Be prepared to admit defeat, because you're about to eat dirt, you turtle!"

"Famous last words!" Dustystorm, my mate, shouted back to me after an amused snort. I then let out a shocked gasp as he nearly seemed to disappear out of thin air from my sight. I looked up to see that Dustystorm had begun to leap up a tree trunk as quickly as any squirrel could.

He really was meant to be a ThunderClan cat, I thought fondly, my heart welling up with pride as I thought about how much my mate had managed to fit into Clan life despite living his entire life as a kittypet until just moons ago.

But no matter how impressed I was with him, or how much I loved and admired him... there was *no way* in the name of StarClan that I was going to let him win this race. *Not even with those exemplary climbing skills he has.* "Ah, you think you're clever - going all squirrel-mode, huh?" I called up to my mate as I watched him leap swiftly from branch to branch.

I then let out another yowl of excitement and triumph as I let my bursts of energy further take me forward. "Not as clever as my footing!"

I then felt as if I was running as quickly and swiftly as I ever had in my entire life as I continued to burst through the ThunderClan

forest. It almost felt as if StarClan was steering me by how easily I was able to dodge past bushes, leap over roots and make my way around trees.

Eventually, as a certain birch tree came into view, I unsheathed my claws and skidded to a halt, my heart full with success as I watched Dustystorm leap down from a tree just a couple of tail-lengths away.

"Ha!" I meowed, leaping up onto all four paws as Dustystorm padded up to me, his pale blue gaze filled with a mix of mock-annoyance and humor. "I made it to the birch tree first! I win!"

Dustystorm snorted as he brushed clumps of dirt and leaves off of me with his tail. "Barely!" he teased, rolling his eyes. "Come on, you have the advantage - you've been in this forest longer than I have. It's going to come more easily to you!"

"Or you're just a sore loser," I purred as I lightly nudged Dustystorm on the shoulder and licked his cheek. I then pulled away and began to trot in tight circles around my mate. "Admit it! Admit that I won!"

Dustystorm followed my movements as his eyes gleamed. "Fine, you won!" he meowed, sighing as he lashed his tail. I then raised my eyebrows with interest as he put his muzzle up to my ear and hissed into it. "For now."

"Oh, please!" I purred with amusement before sitting down next to Dustystorm, finally taking the time to catch my breath after our long run through the forest. "You just keep telling yourself that," I teased to Dustystorm, flicking one of his ears with my tail.

"Oh, I definitely will - because it's true!" Dustystorm taunted, his eyes now shining with determination. After I purred with amusement once more, his eyes then softened as he sighed. "Well... maybe not."

I tilted my head back at my mate. "What do you mean?"

My head suddenly felt light as Dustystorm then twinned his tail

with mine. "You've just seemed so much more like yourself lately," my mate replied, his gaze full of love as we both stood up to begin slowly walking through the forest. "I've seen more of the fiery, energetic Goldenshine that I originally came to like so much."

My heart was beginning to grow extra warm as Dustystorm went on. "I feel like even just a couple of quarter moons ago you wouldn't even be in a mood to race!" he meowed before touching his nose to my ear. "*Now*, however... I think you could lap me around this forest several times over!"

"And don't you forget that!" I teased, then letting a long, mentally-exhausted sigh as I began to reflect on Dustystorm's words. "But you're right. I really wasn't myself, was I?"

But honestly, I think I had every reason to feel as down in the dumps as I had. *Your son not speaking to you for moons, a son that you had been so close to when he was young, ought to cause some negative feelings.*

But now, that had completely changed. My heart wanted to flutter and skip each time I looked back on the dawn that I had been about to take my apprentice, Cherrypaw, out for training, but Swiftflight had been quick to approach me and apologize for all of his past behavior.

Unfortunately, finding out that he had trained in the Dark Forest with Ashfur came along with that, I recalled. *But that doesn't matter anymore. None of it matters!* Swiftflight had left the Dark Forest, and we had been working on our relationship since then.

And now, as Dustystorm had pointed out, I was nearly at my all-time high because of it. There were many, many other things that could put a damper on my happiness at the moment, but the fact that I had fixed my relationship with my son had made it all seem significantly easier.

And part of it is all thanks to...

A chill nearly ran down my spine as Dustystorm and I crawled through some brambles to see two figures in the clearing in front of

us, one of these figures being Snowstorm - also known as the she-cat that was carrying my sister's soul.

Although a piece of her destiny still remained a mystery to Jayfeather and me, we had discovered that she was meant to be the one to pull my son away from what could have been a terrible fate in the Dark Forest.

Originally, Jayfeather and I had thought that this was the extent of what Snowflight was meant to do in order to fulfill her destiny, but when her spirit wasn't released from Snowstorm's body, we had realized that that wasn't the case at all.

All we can do is wait... I thought in dismay as I briefly reflected on all that I had found out in just the past few days - Ashfur's treachery, and so many Dark Forest plans. *We're having to wait for* many *things, unfortunately...*

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Hollyleaf, who was burying what looked like a squirrel, snorted. "It's about time you all joined us," she muttered as she shook her head slowly. Dustystorm and I exchanged an amused glance as the fluffy black she-cat then stood up. "On second thought - maybe you all should head straight for the nursery. It'd be better suited for you two, at the moment."

"Aw, come on, Hollyleaf!" I purred as I padded up to her. "All we did was have a little race!"

"During a hunting patrol?" Hollyleaf replied, her voice a bit sharper. She then lashed her tail and nodded towards Snowstorm, who had her mouth gaped open in the search for prey scent, and lashed her tail. "Come on, Snowstorm's already snatched a shrew and a sparrow. We're heading back to camp soon, and you all need to contribute."

I sighed and dipped my head to Hollyleaf, having to admit that Dustystorm and I had been a little careless with our actions. "Alright, Hollyleaf. I'm sorry," I replied sincerely. *You may have big bursts of energy, but did you think of putting it to use by hunting for your Clan?* I scolded myself. *Instead you had to ask your mate to race!*

Dustystorm's eyes were wide and apologetic as he also nodded to Hollyleaf. "Me too. We'll be right back with something," my mate insisted before turning around and beckoning me with his sandy-gray tail. "Let's go, Goldenshine!"

Dustystorm and I then proceeded to practically cover the entirety of ThunderClan territory, searching for prey as the sun began to set in the sky. Thank StarClan, our endeavors weren't hard to achieve, for the coming greenleaf had blessed our forest with quite the abundance of prey.

By the time that our small hunting patrol had begun our travel back to camp, Dustystorm and I each carried a couple of catches in our jaws. I couldn't help but let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I glanced over at Hollyleaf, who was flanking me on one side. "Happy now?" I purred through the prey in my mouth.

Hollyleaf rolled her eyes next to me. "Sure," she replied. "But that prey could have been caught a few moments earlier than it was - just saying."

"I know, I know," I sighed, lightly brushing my tail over Hollyleaf's shoulder. "I'm sorry, we were just having a little fun. It won't happen again."

I then purred with amusement to myself after I had spoken. *Goodness, I sound like I'm speaking to Firestar or Brambleclaw!* I thought jokingly. *Hollyleaf sure likes to stick to the rules, doesn't she?*

I then glanced over at Dustystorm, who was flanking me on my other side, to see his gaze full of humor, revealing that he was thinking exactly as I was. A purr then began to rumble in my throat as I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude and affection. I wound my tail around my mate's as I thought, *as much as I don't like to break rules either, I could never regret getting to have fun with this one, even if we're on patrol.*

The sun had almost completely disappeared behind the trees by the time that our hunting patrol had returned to camp. We immediately padded across the camp clearing to drop our prey off at the fresh-kill pile.

Almost immediately after I had set my prey down, I was nearly startled by the blur of white that flashed past me. I whipped my head around to see that Snowstorm was making her way deeper into to camp. She seemed to be approaching Swiftflight, who had been talking with Cherrypaw, who I had let off early after a grueling battle-training day, and Molepaw, her brother, near the apprentices den as we'd returned.

Snowstorm excitedly walked up to the three, and although I couldn't hear what they were saying from I was, they seemed to immediately engage in happy, cheerful conversation.

As I've said a lot lately, thank StarClan, I thought with relief as I watched Snowstorm and Swiftflight exchange words. Not only had my relationship with Swiftflight been strained, but other cats had been affected as well - including Snowstorm, who I definitely considered to be Swiftflight's best friend. *But he mended his relationship with her, too. I knew that he had it in him.*

I let out a sigh full of ease, taking a quick glance towards the medicine den before turning to Dustystorm and touching my nose to his shoulder. "You go on to our nest, I'll be right back," I whispered to my mate, realizing that the ThunderClan camp had fallen quiet - many cats already in their dens, sleeping. I then used my paw to move the shrew that Hollyleaf had caught. "I'm going to bring this to Jayfeather. I don't think that he's had a bite to eat all day."

Dustystorm's eyes widened at my words. "Great StarClan - take your time, then!" Dustystorm insisted, his tail lashing with surprise. He then touched his muzzle to mine before proceeding to walk towards the warriors den. "You'll walk in to find me dreaming of how I'm going to win our next race!"

"Oh, you wish!" I called back to him in a hushed voice. I then felt a purr rumble in my throat as I returned the tender gaze Dustystorm was giving me. "I love you."

"I love you too," Dustystorm replied immediately, his eyes shimmering like the lake in the moonlight, before continuing his travel. "Now go feed our medicine cat!"

I had to suppress a loud purr of amusement at Dustystorm's words as I finally bent down to pick up the shrew I had separated from the rest of the pile. I quickly and urgently padded towards the medicine den, because as far as I knew - Jayfeather *hadn't* eaten all day. *And even if he has, I can use the opportunity to ask him about Snowstorm. Maybe he's had some new dreams? I realized excitedly. We haven't been able to catch up and talk very much in the past few days, but maybe now he has time!*

I quietly made my way through the bramble screen that marked the entrance to the medicine clearing. One of the first things I saw once I was inside was the back of a certain gray tabby pelt, the paws attached to this gray tabby pelt hard at work organizing the herb stocks. Next to him, Briarlight was already curled up in her nest, fast asleep.

I padded a few tail-lengths into the den and dropped the shrew onto the ground. "Hey, Jayfeather," I whispered, assuming that he knew I was there. "If you're hungry, I brought a shrew for you before I head off to sleep."

I decided to sit down in anticipation for the medicine cat's reply... which never actually ended up coming.

I couldn't help but let out a small grunt and narrow my eyes. I knew that Jayfeather wasn't the most courteous or polite cat around this lake... but not even a "thank you"? *Or a "no, thank you" would even work...*

"Um... Jayfeather?" I meowed more hesitantly as I took a step closer to where the tom was working. "Did you hear me?"

I then nearly flinched as the gray tabby tom whipped his head around, and I met his piercing blind blue gaze. "Yes, I heard you!" he hissed back at me.

My eyes widened at the extra-harshness in his tone. "Then why didn't you-"

"Obviously I was too busy with what I was doing to reply!" Jayfeather replied, his eyes blaring.

I tried to refrain from taking a step back. Jayfeather never gave any cat the warmest of welcomes when they came into his den, but I knew that this was extreme, even for him. "I'm sorry, Jayfeather, I just..." I then trailed off, figuring that Jayfeather would scold whatever I'd say to try and explain myself. I shook my head quickly as I then meowed, "Whatever. There's your prey, if you want it."

I was actually shocked by the amount of frustration blaring in Jayfeather's eyes. "Wonderful," he murmured sarcastically before whipping himself around and returning to his herbs. "Now leave me be."

My mouth nearly dropped to the ground. "Fine!" I spat back at the medicine cat before stomping out of the den, utterly bewildered by my friend's behavior. I mean, he usually always acted like he had a burr in his fur. But now he had acted as if there were two burrs... maybe even three.

As I stormed angrily out of the medicine den, I barely noticed Hollyleaf, who almost seemed to be waiting outside for me. "Hey!" she meowed as she raised her tail to cut me off. She then tilted her head to try and meet my gaze, her green eyes filled with concern. "Why do you look like someone just put ants in your nest?"

I snorted as I turned to face Hollyleaf. "Because your brother is," I muttered as I rolled my eyes. "Ask him the same question - I'm sure he'll reply so very kindly."

To my surprise, Hollyleaf's only response to my words was a single lash of her tail, and her eyes darkened as she seemed to fall deep into thought.

"I see," she murmured after several heartbeats, and then slowly turned to pad into the medicine den, her gaze still incredibly contemplative and pensive. "I'll see you tomorrow, Goldenshine."

"Goodnight?" I replied to the black she-cat, completely confused as I watched her fluffy tail disappear through the bramble screen.

I then stood where I was for many moments, trying to process everything that had happened in the past few moments. *Why didn't*

Hollyleaf seem to want to question anything that I said? I know I'd certainly be concerned if someone approached me and said that Snowflight was in a fit!

I sighed and finally turned around to begin walking towards the warriors den, but I almost instantly paused again. I looked back towards the medicine den again. *It's almost like Hollyleaf knew that he was angry, or that she knows of a reason as to why he* could *be angry...*

I then whipped my head around for the last time and proceeded to crawl into the warriors den. Yet another mystery to contemplate for days on end, I'm sure, I thought, trying to push down frustration as I settled down next to Dustystorm in our nest. *Whatever was going on, it all was very unsettling. I wonder what's going on with Jayfeather?*

Chapter 3

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

"Great StarClan, I cannot *believe* what I am hearing right now!" I hissed before whipping my head back towards the golden tabby pelt of my mother, whose hard, gray gaze was burning into me. "You've lost your mind!"

Goldenshine's eyes widened at my words. "*I've* lost my mind?" she exclaimed, her tail lashing up in surprise. "You've got to be joking!"

I let my head fall to the ground as I shook it slowly. "This whole conversation is a joke."

"I second that!" Goldenshine meowed after a contemptuous snort. "Goodness, I can't believe that I've ever called you my son."

"And you my mother!" I replied, raising my voice once again. "I can't even *fathom* the fact that I'm kin to someone that thinks this way."

"You're one to talk!" Goldenshine meowed, and when I simply responded with a sniff, she shifted herself closer to me and hardened her gaze. "This is really how you feel?"

I returned the look right back at my mother. "Yes, it is how I feel."

"*Shrew* is the best type of prey?"

"Undoubtedly!" I insisted, nodding to the small piece of fresh-kill at my paws, and then glancing towards the one in front of Goldenshine. "And even if it wasn't, it'd still be better than a *thrush!*"

I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as my mother let out a feigned offended gasp. "*So* not true!" she breathed, her demeanor tense, as if she had truly been taken-aback by what I had said.

I finally released my purr before pulling my shrew closer to me, flashing a gaze full of mischief towards Goldenshine. "Hm, it must be rough living in so much denial..." I teased. "You must know that this is a pointless argument."

"Oh yes, I'm aware," Goldenshine murmured, her eyes narrowing as a smirk emerged on her face, "because thrushes are the best type of prey. Deal with it."

I rolled my eyes and let out a conceding huff. "Fine. We'll agree to disagree."

"Oh, sure," Goldenshine replied, her tail lashing back and forth happily now. "That's code for *'I surrender'*."

"Your name is code for *'I'm an idiot'*," I purred back at Goldenshine before taking another glance down at my prey, not being able to help but lick my lips. "Okay, but in all seriousness, I am very hungry."

I then looked back up at Goldenshine to meet her warm, loving gaze. "I'm with you on that!" she meowed cheerfully, then bending down to take a bite of her very, dare I say... *mediocre* catch. "Let's eat!"

I stared back at Goldenshine, returning the warm gaze that she had given me. "Let's eat," I then repeated as I felt my heart almost physically grow. And as I began to eat my most *excellent* piece of prey, I couldn't help but think, *if I had known earlier how wonderful it would feel to reconcile with your mother earlier, there's a possibility that I would have left the Dark Forest long before I actually did.*

I then let out a quiet sniff. *But unfortunately, I don't think Ashfur would have made that very easy,* I thought bitterly, even just the thought of the gray-speckled tom that had manipulated me for so many moons making me want to slash at the ground in rage.

He had been the reason that I'd lost my relationship with Goldenshine, my own mother, who I'd been so close to before I'd begun training in the Dark Forest, in the first place. That fox-heart had jeopardized that, among many, many other things as well.

The night that my eyes had been opened for the first time still sent chills down my spine every time I thought about it - me fighting the cat that I had practically been walking on thin ice with, Snowstorm being the one to pull me out, and the fact that the trap I had been under was... *gone*. Completely gone.

Ashfur hadn't even tried to reach out to me since I had run away. I still definitely dreamed of images of the Dark Forest as I slept, but I hadn't had the misfortune of seeing Ashfur's face even once. *Thank StarClan,* I thought as I bent down to take another bite of my shrew. *Thank StarClan.*

"Hi there, Cherrypaw!"

I had just swallowed my latest bite when I heard my mother's greeting. My ears flicked and my stomach twisted at her words, and I looked up to see that sure enough, the ginger pelt of Cherrypaw was approaching us.

"Hi, Cherrypaw," I purred to the she-cat as I watched her settle down next to Goldenshine.

Cherrypaw's gaze flicked over to me as I had spoken to her, and I calmly met her warm amber gaze. "Hi, Swiftflight," she purred back, her eyes suddenly flicking back and forth from me and the ground. She then turned to face my mother. "Goldenshine, are we going out to train soon?"

Goldenshine immediately nodded to her apprentice. "Yes, we are! Just as soon as I finish my thrush." I then flicked my ears as I watched her gaze shoot back to me, her eyes gleaming with amusement. "My scrumptious, mouth-watering, *amazing* thrush."

My eyes narrowed down into slits as I stared back at Goldenshine. *Oh, I see how it is...* I then shifted my gaze to look at Cherrypaw. "Cherrypaw, can I ask you a question?"

Cherrypaw's gaze seemed to brighten up even more as she looked back at me. "Really?" she exclaimed before beginning to shift her paws back and forth as her tail twitched. "Yeah, sure! What's up?"

I hardened my gaze as it stayed locked with hers. "I really need you to be honest..." I began, giving the ginger she-cat a small nod. "Which is better - a thrush, or a shrew?"

As I waited for Cherrypaw's reply, I couldn't help but feel a small twinge of confusion as I watched her demeanor sink down just a bit, and I wondered if I had just imagined the glint of disappointment in her eyes. But it all disappeared in a moment, as Cherrypaw was back to her cheerful self in just a heartbeat.

"Um... well, if I'm being honest," Cherrypaw murmured, her gaze thoughtful, "I always get really excited when I see a shrew on the fresh-kill pile!"

I immediately was overwhelmed with triumph and leaped up to my paws. I stared straight as Goldenshine as I yowled, "Ha!"

My mother rolled her eyes as she watched my celebration. "Oh, whatever. It's just one opinion," she muttered.

"A very valid, supreme opinion!" I demanded, flicking my tail towards Cherrypaw, who was watching our conversation with amused, wide eyes.

Goldenshine flashed her apprentice a look full of pride. "Well, I can't argue with you there..." she admitted as she flicked Cherrypaw's ear with her tail. "But Great StarClan... my own apprentice has *betrayed* me!"

Cherrypaw gave her mentor an apologetic look. "Sorry, Goldenshine..." she replied, clearly trying to hold back her laughter.

"Hm, if you both love shrew so much, why don't you proclaim this wonderful love by sharing that little lump of junk?" Goldenshine murmured scornfully, though her eyes were warm.

Cherrypaw's eyes widened as her gaze moved from Goldenshine to me. Her big, amber eyes were questioning and uncertain. "Swiftflight?"

I let out a small purr, amused by her hesitance. I nodded and eagerly beckoned her over with my tail before shifting slightly to

make a spot for her beside me.

For some reason, my fur seemed to tingle as Cherrypaw settled down beside me, her fur brushing against mine just briefly. I then watched her as she bent down and took a bite out of my shrew.

"Oh, yum!" she exclaimed after she had swallowed. "And this is an especially good shrew, too!"

"Glad to hear it," Goldenshine muttered.

After flashing Goldenshine another amused look, I shifted slightly so that I could more easily meet Cherrypaw's gaze. "What are you all going to do in training today?" I asked the she-cat, then giving my mother yet another look. "If it's hunting, Goldenshine should definitely let you take the lead."

I then returned to Cherrypaw as she let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Maybe next time," she purred teasingly. "We're going to do a bit of battle training, and then I'm going to learn how to climb trees!"

I could help but let out an exasperated huff at those words. "Oh, StarClan," I breathed as I shook my head slowly.

"What?" Cherrypaw asked, her voice still full of laughter.

My horrid days as an apprentice of learning how to climb trees... I continued to shake my head as I was brought back to some negative memories. "I still don't think that I've mastered that," I admitted to Cherrypaw. "I'm afraid to try again in the fear that it will be the last thing that I will ever do."

Cherrypaw's eyes widened at my words. "Oh no, really?" she meowed worriedly. "If it's hard for *you*, then I'm definitely doomed!"

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed, giving Cherrypaw a light nudge and meeting her gaze. "I'm sure you're going to be great."

And I found that my gaze stayed where it was for a moment, until my ears flicked at the familiar sliver-and-white tabby pelt that I caught out of the corner of my eye.

I instantly stood up, my gaze now locked on where Ivypool was making her way into camp. "Um... I've gotta go," I muttered.

"Oh, yeah?" Goldenshine meowed as she raised her eyebrows. "Where are you off to?"

I hesitated a bit before finally replying. "Oh, I just need to speak with someone," I replied quickly, suddenly feeling like I was in a hurry. I then padded up to touch my nose to Goldenshine's. "Bye."

I could hear my mother's purr as she pressed back. "Bye, my dear."

I then turned around and nodded to Cherrypaw. "Bye, Cherrypaw!" I meowed kindly before being struck by confusion as the ginger she-cat seemed to be staring off at something, her amber eyes dark. "Cherrypaw?"

I tried to follow her gaze, and to my surprise, it landed exactly on where I had been looking just a few moments ago - right at Ivypool. I looked back at Cherrypaw to find her shaking her head quickly.

"Oh... bye, Swiftflight," she murmured as she met my gaze again, seemingly snapping out of her thoughts. I then watched as she stood up and turned towards my mother. "Goldenshine, are you ready to go now?" she meowed more enthusiastically. "I really want to get started."

For some reason, Goldenshine gave me a very brief look before standing up with Cherrypaw. "Sure thing!" my mother exclaimed. "The thrush that I just ate gave me all of the energy, happiness, and readiness that I could ever ask for!"

I stared warmly and humoredly at Goldenshine as I watched her finally walk off with Cherrypaw just behind her. My gaze quickly shifted to the ginger she-cat, and my eyes narrowed as I reflected on her latest actions.

I mean, she went into a full-on shut-down mode for a moment there, I thought as I watched her tail disappear through the gorse tunnel. *She was looking at Ivypool... Oh my StarClan...*

My eyes widened as my thoughts flew back to the words that

Snowstorm had revealed to me a little while back, words that still resurfaced often to this day. It had never explicitly been confirmed, but Snowstorm had seemed so sure that Cherrypaw liked me. *Liked* me, liked me. Had she been feeling *jealous* that I was going to talk to Ivypool?

I then shook my head quickly as I began to delve into these thoughts. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't focus on that situation right now. I needed to speak with Ivypool as soon as possible.

Since I had left to Dark Forest, I had wanted so badly to let the tabby she-cat know of just that. We hadn't spoken much in the past moons, as she was still infuriated with me that I hadn't agreed to spy with her in the Dark Forest, and I had barely been given any opportunity to speak with her recently. And the certain softness that I'd felt towards her had made that even more difficult to deal with.

But now, as she was returning from a patrol, I took advantage of the opportunity.

I found myself having to push down fear and nerves as I finally padded up to the she-cat. "Hey, um... Ivypool?"

My heart then nearly skipped a beat as Ivypool quickly turned around, and I met her cold, dark-blue gaze. "What?" she muttered sharply.

I looked down to the ground as I shifted my paws back and forth. "Can I please talk to you?" I asked hesitantly.

I managed to grow even more intimidated as Ivypool's eyes narrowed down into small slits. "Sure, you *can*," she replied coldly before beginning to pad away. "But you *won't*."

I suddenly had to push down impatience as I urgently followed Ivypool. "Why not?" I growled to her.

To my luck, Ivypool paused and looked back at me once again. "I don't know what I would gain by talking to you."

I couldn't help but let out a small snort in response as I reflected on our past encounters. "A few days ago, I would have agreed with you

on that front," I admitted, lashing my tail.

"And I hope that you still agree with me a few days later," Ivypool muttered as she clearly tried to suppress a growl rising in her throat.

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Ivypool, please?" I meowed, padding up to stand side by side with her and meeting her gaze. "Believe it or not, there may be something that you gain from this."

After a few heartbeats of contemplation, I nearly sighed with relief as Ivypool gave the smallest nod. "Hm, I'll decide that," she murmured before sitting down and beckoning me to do the same. "What?"

I took a deep breath before beginning. "Okay, Ivypool. Listen..." And listen to my full sentence please, otherwise you'll shred me to bits before I can finish it. "I still refuse to spy in the Dark Forest with you-"

"Thanks for the reminder!" Ivypool exclaimed, cutting me off as I had predicted she would. "Are we done here?"

"No, for StarClan's sake!" I hissed back, losing my patience for just a moment. I then muttered half to myself, "Ironically, the word *listen* went through one ear and out the other..."

Ivypool let out an annoyed sigh as she rolled her eyes. "Sorry," she murmured, nodding to me. "Go on."

"Listen, Ivypool," I repeated, cutting right to the chase. "I won't spy with you. I can't."

Ivypool stayed silent, her eyes narrowing once again.

"But not for the reason that you think anymore..." I admitted, my gaze falling to the ground. But after a moment, I looked up to meet the warrior's gaze once again. "I've left the Dark Forest."

I then watched as Ivypool's narrowed slits slowly turned into wide moons. "What?" she breathed. "Really?"

I gave the she-cat a single nod. "Yes, really."

"You're not pulling my tail?"

I let out an amused sniff. "Come on, I'm not *that* sick."

Ivypool then proceeded to snort and roll her eyes, but after a few moments, her gaze returned to looking just as baffled as it had been before. "Why?" she asked simply.

I suddenly hardened my gaze as I looked back at the silver-and-white she-cat. "Why are you a spy?"

Ivypool looked surprised by the question. "Because the Dark Forest has evil intent, but so many cats training there fail to see it, so they're succeeding," she meowed defensively. "I can't let that happen if I can help it."

I felt a small twinge of admiration for Ivypool's actions as I gave her a slow nod. "And that's why I left," I meowed definitively.

"But you've *always* known that, Swiftflight!" Ivypool meowed angrily. "What's changed?"

"My courage. My *common sense*, that's what!" I replied, hardening my meow. I then relaxed as I prepared to give Ivypool quite the explanation. "Basically I... I got some sense knocked into me." *That "sense" coming in the form of my mother's reincarnated sister...* "Ashfur had me under his little spell for too long, and I finally had the strength to let him know it."

I took a deep breath and let out a small purr of amusement before going on. "Call me banal if you want, but I was turned into something that I shouldn't have been," I meowed, then beginning to shake my head. "I... can't go back. I'm sorry, but I *refuse* to. I can't risk it again. I never should have in the first place."

After I finished, I was immediately relieved to see Ivypool's dark blue eyes gleaming with approval and admiration as she nodded her head slowly. "Now *that* is a reason that I can actually respect."

My ears perked up excitedly. "Really?"

"Yeah..." Ivypool replied, still seemingly shocked and blown away by the news that I had just given her. "Yeah, it is."

I stood up. "Listen, I may not be able to spy in the Dark Forest with you, but don't worry, I'm doing something else to contribute."

Ivypool's eyes widened once again. "You are?" she exclaimed before standing up as well, her gaze burning into mine. "What?"

I hesitated for just a brief moment, wondering if I should have revealed so much to Ivypool. *I'm not sure if Goldenshine, Lilypetal, or Thornclaw would want me telling other cats about our meetings yet*, I realized. *We're under a "no secrets" pact, but I certainly don't think that it applies to all of ThunderClan...*

Coming to a decision, I shook my head dismissively at Ivypool. "Um... it's complicated," I meowed quickly before lightly touching the tip of my tail to Ivypool's shoulder. "Just know that you can trust me."

To my fear, Ivypool looked wary for just a heartbeat, but after just a moment's thought, she gave me a nod, her gaze certain. "Okay," she replied. She then flashed me one last look full of pride before beginning to pad past me. I was then surprised as I felt her tail nuzzle the top of my head. "I'm proud of you, you mouse-brain."

"Thanks," I meowed as I watched Ivypool pad towards the warriors den, and once her silver tabby tail had disappeared inside, I turned away, feeling an extreme bout of satisfaction from how well that conversation had gone.

Ivypool trusts me again! I thought triumphantly. *She's not angry with me anymore!* The thought made me incredibly happy, and I could imagine that Swiftpaw a few moons ago would practically be leaping for joy.

However, as happy as I was now, I found that I stomach didn't flip upside down, and my heart didn't beat at double the speed when I pictured a growing relationship with Ivypool. Yes, a friendship with her would be great, *really* great...

But maybe it was the separation from her all of these moons; the fact that we were never really close, or the fact my feelings for her were associated with such a rough patch of my life, that made me realize that my feelings for her were... fading?

And if that wasn't enough, finding a mate honestly seems to be at the rock bottom of Ivypool's priorities, I joked to myself. I knew that I would always admire her greatly - her defiance and bravery, and the sight of her would probably still make my heart skip a beat, *but nothing more than that.*

Feeling very at ease with my thoughts, I let out a contented sigh as I stood up and began to pad towards the camp entrance, ready to go on a quick hunting trip. *Today was another step towards redeeming myself,* I thought happily. *There's still a long way to go, but it was certainly a big pawstep forward.*

Chapter 4

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I could hear quiet purrs of amusement behind me as I let out a long yawn. I then closed my jaws and shook out my fur before turning and meeting the humored gaze of Emberkit just beside me.

I gave her a teasing flick on the ear with my tail, then bending my head down to smooth over the fur on her head. "Alright, back to it!" I meowed in between licks.

"Again!" Emberkit exclaimed, rolling her hazel eyes. "I've lost count of how many times you've stopped to yawn!"

Lightningkit, who had been sitting next to Wrenkit by the nursery entrance, shook his head slowly as he padded up closer to Emberkit and me. "I feel like you've done more yawning then grooming - for Wrenkit and me both!" he purred, lashing his tail.

Wrenkit followed closely behind his brother, his pale blue eyes full of annoyance. "Aw, come on," he murmured. "She did just wake up - give her a break!"

Feeling a twinge of affection, I looked up and gave my son a grateful look. "Thank you, Wrenkit," I purred to him. "But they're right - I'm sorry that I'm so drowsy. I'll be wide awake by the time that your apprentice ceremony starts!"

I then paused in grooming Emberkit once again, but not because I needed to yawn this time. *Great StarClan... apprentice ceremony!* I thought, feeling more and more baffled with each time those words came to mind. *It's finally here, and it feels as unreal to me as if I were becoming an apprentice myself!*

I then let out a long sigh before continuing to lick along Emberkit's neck fur, which seemed to be sticking out in every possible

direction.

I also felt another yawn coming on, but I held it in as best as I could. *I hopefully will be feeling more awake once I'm watching the kits receive their names, but I would have liked to be able to right now. I hope they know how excited I am for them!*

But my dreams were making that pretty gosh darn difficult. It was the reason that I felt like I needed to let out a yawn every single heartbeat. Last night's dreams hadn't caused as much of a fiasco as the night before, but they had left me awake, tossing and turning for what had felt like moons.

And unfortunately, now the dreams were becoming especially weirder and unsettling. I continued to receive many flashbacks of my time as a kittypet - me laying by the fireplace in my old Twoleg home, playing in my yard... And looking out to the forest from the top of my fence had been something that managed to never be left out.

And this weirdness was always followed by... darkness - darkness in some form, whether that meant a dark forest, or just... *darkness*; blackness in every direction. But through that darkness, in whatever form it came in, there was always something that was consistent.

Those frightening, familiar blue eyes, I thought to myself, a shiver running down my spine as I gave Emberkit one final lick on the ear. "All done!" I tried to meow more enthusiastically in order to shake off my thoughts. "That didn't take too long, did it?"

Emberkit let out a purr of amusement before touching her nose briefly to my cheek. "No, it didn't - it was just fine," my daughter replied, her eyes now sympathetic. "I'm sorry I teased."

I purred back and licked Emberkit's cheek. "Oh, never mind that," I meowed softly, then nodding to my yellow-eyed son. "Lightningkit, your turn now!"

With a nod, Lightningkit then excitedly padded up to me. And as I began to smooth out his already very sleek fur, out of the corner my eye I could see the golden tabby pelt of Thornclaw entering the

nursery.

Emberkit let out a squeak of excitement at the sight of her father. "Hi, Thornclaw!" she purred, nuzzling her head into his flank.

"Hi!" Lightningkit then mewed, Wrenkit then simply giving a kind nod.

I could hear a purr rumbling in Thornclaw's throat as he touched his muzzle to each of his kits. He then stepped back and sat down. "Hello, you three!" he meowed. I was then amused and confused as I watched my mate narrow his pale blue eyes. "Huh, I'm confused..." he then murmured, his gaze flitting over Wrenkit, Lightningkit and Emberkit back and forth many times over.

Emberkit's eyes widened as she looked up at her father. "What's wrong?"

Wrenkit came up to sit next to Thornclaw as he answered. "I don't know..." he muttered. His eyes then brightened, and he began to nuzzle his son's head. "Are you all in the wrong den? You look much too big and strong to be kits in the nursery!"

I saw Lightningkit's tail begin to twitch back and forth quickly. "You've got that right!" he exclaimed.

"Well... we are technically still kits right now," Wrenkit pointed out in his usual calm, dignified manner.

I nodded in agreement to my son. "But only for a few moments longer!" I meowed eagerly. But just after I had spoken, another twinge of sadness jabbed at my heart. I looked up at Thornclaw and met his sentimental gaze.

"Only a few moments longer..." I repeated more quietly this time. After a heartbeat, I then shook my head quickly, took a step back, and licked Lightningkit's cheek. "And... you're done now!"

Lightningkit turned and dipped his sleek black head to me. "Thanks, mother!" he purred before turning to Emberkit, who had called his name as he'd spoken.

"Come on!" my daughter meowed eagerly from where she now stood next to Wrenkit by the nursery entrance. "Wrenkit and I want to go out and watch everyone gather!"

Lightningkit flicked his ears and widened his eyes, then quickly following his two siblings out. "Right behind you!" he exclaimed just before the last of his tail disappeared from sight.

I let out a sigh, realizing that that might've been the last time that Wrenkit, Lightningkit and Emberkit would ever leave the nursery. This time, they would have no reason to return.

But luckily I didn't have to dwell on my sad thoughts for very long. Just a moment after the kits had left the nursery, Thornclaw turned to face me before proceeding the pad up to me and begin licking behind my ears.

I couldn't help but purr with amusement at the gesture. "What are you doing, sweetheart?" I asked as I continued to purr.

Thornclaw then began to lick the top of my head. "It's your turn now!"

I then let out a gasp, pretending to be offended. "Ouch!" I exclaimed teasingly. "Think I look too disheveled even for a normal day?"

"Oh, come on, you're always perfect in my eyes," my mate replied, pausing from where he'd been smoothing over my neck fur to flash me an affectionate look. "But when you woke up, you leapt right out of the nest to groom the kits, and you didn't touch your own fur at all!"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter at Thornclaw's words. "My goodness, I guess I didn't!" I replied. I then let my head fall on Thornclaw's shoulder as he finished the quick grooming. "More dreams... depriving me of sleep, resulting in me sleeping *in!*"

Thornclaw looked down at me, his eyes wide. "The dreams *still* haven't calmed down?" he questioned, sounding genuinely shocked. "That's very strange. Do you think that you should go to Leafpool or Jayfeather about them?"

I thought for a few heartbeats before simply shrugging. "I would, but... I don't know," I replied to Thornclaw, my own eyes narrowing with pensiveness. "I'm not sure if my dreams are an omen of sorts; it's personal to me, I can tell."

"I see," Thornclaw murmured, nodding his head slowly before touching his nose to my ear. "I wish I could help you in some way."

"You're doing all that you can, believe me," I purred, touching my nose to his. "Thank you - for the support *and* for the grooming."

Thornclaw pulled me closer to him with his tail. "Of course," he meowed softly before lifting his head to stare beyond the nursery entrance. "Great StarClan, can you believe it?"

I snorted with amusement. "If by 'it', you are referring to the fact that three kits of our own are going to become apprentices, then no, I can't at all!"

"Goldenshine and Snowflight were the ones sitting under that Highledge just *days* ago, I'm telling you!" Thornclaw replied, shaking his head slowly.

"And just like that, it's happening with our second litter - our last litter," I breathed, almost feeling baffled by my own words.

I then stood silent for a moment before locking eyes with Thornclaw with a hard gaze. "Because this is our last litter, correct?"

"Yes, please."

Then, after exchanging one last amused glance, Thornclaw and I finally left the nursery just as Firestar was calling the meeting. We sat down just behind where Emberkit, Wrenkit and Lightningkit had settled down. The three of them were exchanging nervous, excited glances to each other as they watched the cats of ThunderClan continue to gather.

My heart began to beat faster as I realized just how excited I was for the three of them, my sadness of them leaving the nursery luckily being overpowered by it. They're going to be so phenomenal, I thought with pride before slowly scanning my eyes

around the camp. I wonder who Firestar is going to pick to help them each along the way?

Just as the camp fell silent, I gave a nod in greeting to Sorreltail and Brackenfur, who had come to sit on Thornclaw's other side, and then Goldenshine and Dustystorm, who trotted up to sit next to me. We then all looked up as Firestar leaped down from the Highledge. My stomach practically flipped upside down as I watched him beckon my three kits with his tail.

"Cats of ThunderClan," the ThunderClan leader began. "Three of our kits have finally reached the age of six moons, and are ready to become apprentices."

I had to suppress a purr of amusement as Emberkit eagerly nodded her head to Firestar.

He briefly flashed her an amused glance before continuing. He raised his ginger head as he meowed out, "Wrenkit, Lightningkit and Emberkit - until you receive your warrior names, you will be known as Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw and Emberpaw."

Thornclaw and I looked at each other happily, both of us practically beaming with pride before returning our attention to the ceremony. Firestar was speaking to Wrenpaw first.

"Wrenpaw, your mentor will be Birchfall," the leader meowed, giving a nod to the pale brown tabby tom. "Birchfall, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You will be the mentor of Wrenpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

My eyes narrowed as I watched Birchfall pad up to my son. *Note that Firestar didn't give any credit to Birchfall's mentor...* I thought to myself bitterly. *Good thing that he didn't.*

I then watched as Firestar seemed to be looking for someone, his green eyes scanning the camp, before landing somewhat close to where I was sitting. I heard Goldenshine gasp beside me, and I peered over her to see that Dustystorm was looking back at Firestar, his pale blue eyes wide. He also seemed to be flicking his gaze towards Nightwing, who was sitting a few tail-lengths away with

Icecloud.

My heart began welling up with pride as I realized what might be going on. I was practically wanting to jump up with excitement as Firestar spoke again. "Nightwing and Dustystorm, you two are also ready to take on your first apprentice. You have shown constant commitment to this Clan, and I believe it is time that you both pass it on to those younger than you."

Firestar's eyes then rested on Lightningpaw, whose paws were kneading excitedly. "Lightningpaw, your mentor will be Nightwing." He then shifted his gaze to look at Emberpaw. "And your mentor will be Dustystorm."

Yes! I then turned to see Dustystorm quickly stand up and begin to pad towards his new apprentice, but I nearly let out a *mrrow* of laughter as Goldenshine raised her tail as if to stop him. "Hey," she meowed, narrowing her eyes at her mate. "Be nice to my sister."

"We're watching you," Thornclaw meowed teasingly, giving a nod to Dustystorm.

Dustystorm purred with amusement after giving Goldenshine an affectionate nuzzle on her cheek. "I will. Don't worry!" he purred, then running up to Emberpaw as if he couldn't stand the wait any longer. He and Emberpaw immediately seemed to clique, as they both immediately began to talk enthusiastically to each other.

That was a perfect match, I thought happily to myself, then shifted my gaze over to look at where Nightwing and Lightningpaw were introducing themselves. *And them too - Nightwing will be able to teach him how to manage hunting and sneaking with a dark pelt!*

And of course, it appeared as if Wrenpaw and Birchfall were going to work well together too; Birchfall was a very well-respected warrior in ThunderClan, and I could be sure that he would teach Wrenpaw everything that he knew.

I was then pulled from my thoughts as I heard Thornclaw let out a seemingly contemplative grunt beside me. "What?" I asked, my voice full of laughter.

"I've gotta go," Thornclaw replied, standing up and staring in the direction of where our three kits were still exchanging words with their new mentors. "I'm going to talk to our kits about proper training etiquette."

I nearly burst with laughter. "What happened to you being sure that they were ready?"

Thornclaw paused and looked back at me from where he had begun to walk. "Oh, they definitely are!" he insisted before continuing his travel. "But we're playing it safe."

My goodness gracious... I thought, purring as I watched my mate go. I then proceeded to pad over to and settle down in a spot close to the Highledge so that I could get a better look of my three kits listening to their father's words.

Just a few heartbeats after I had sat down, I recognized the bright ginger pelt of Firestar approaching me.

I flicked my ears and gave the ThunderClan leader a nod in greeting. "Hi there, Firestar!" I meowed kindly.

"Hello, Lilypetal," Firestar replied as he sat down next to me. "How does it feel to see another one of your litters leave the nursery?"

I sighed, all of the feelings I had felt in the past moments resurfacing. "It's always very hard, but I'm so, so proud of them," I answered to the leader. I then lashed my tail, my next words full of elation and humor. "Aaannnnd I can't help but get excited at the prospect of getting to be a warrior again!" *It will give me the opportunity to focus more on these mysterious dreams too...*

Firestar purred with amusement at my words before I continued on. "But not getting to see my kits nearly as much outweighs that, of course," I murmured more solemnly. My ears then perked up as I recalled the exciting moment I experienced, getting to see two former kittypets receive two of my kits as apprentices.

"By the way I must give you some praise on the mentors that you chose for them," I commented happily. "Birchfall will be great, of

course, but I was so glad to see Dustystorm and Nightwing up there with him."

"Of course," Firestar replied warmly. "They are two dedicated, loyal ThunderClan cats; they deserved the opportunity."

I then grew a bit confused and surprised as Firestar's eyes widened, as if an alarming thought had just crossed through his mind. This baffled expression was still on his face when he turned to meet my gaze again. "Lilypetal, you've never had an apprentice, have you?"

I simply shook my head, but I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows as I thought about possible implications that came with this question. "No, I haven't," I replied.

Firestar shook his head slowly. "Well, that's not right, is it?" he asked, almost to himself. "I haven't given you an apprentice in all the time that you've been here."

My eyes widened, immediately feeling guilty that *Firestar* was feeling guilty about something as little as that. Yes, I had never had an apprentice since I'd come to ThunderClan, but I certainly wasn't holding a grudge because of it!

"Oh my goodness, that is completely alright!" I insisted to Firestar. "The timing has always been off, I suppose."

Firestar then seemed to fall deep into thought just as Brambleclaw, the ThunderClan deputy, approached. And just after I had given the brown tabby tom an enthusiastic greeting, Firestar lifted his head to meet Brambleclaw's gaze.

"Brambleclaw, have you heard of any she-cats expecting kits in ThunderClan?" the ginger tom asked.

Brambleclaw exchanged a brief, confused, and humored glance with me before sitting down and answering his leader. "Actually, I have," he meowed. "Sorreltail is expecting Brackenfur's second litter."

At that news, I immediately sprang up onto all four of my paws and gasped. "Wait, she is?" I exclaimed cheerfully. "Oh my StarClan, that's so exciting!"

"It certainly is," Firestar purred, watching as I composed myself and sat back down. "Especially for you."

I tilted my head to the side. "How so?"

I then watched, still partly confused as Firestar exchanged a look with Brambleclaw. "When their kits reach six moons of age, one of them will be yours to train. I'll say it now!"

My mouth slowly dropped open, and my eyes widened once again. I could hardly believe what I had just heard. Sure, I wasn't angry that I'd never had an apprentice, but that didn't mean I'd be any less happy to find out that I'd finally be receiving one! "No way!" I exclaimed. "Are you serious?"

Brambleclaw purred with amusement. "I'd hope so. It's about time!"

I nearly wanted to jump in the air from how excited I was.

So... I did.

"Thank you!" I then practically squealed to Firestar. "Thank you so much!" *Just within a few seasons, I'll be training an apprentice!*

I then let out a contented sigh as I turned around, my eyes just barely catching Birchfall, Dustystorm and Nightwing as they led my kits out into the forest for their territory tour. *That'll be me, soon enough!*

I then narrowed my eyes as another thought crossed my mind. *My present problems have been occupying me so much recently...* I realized with dismay. *So much so that I was a bit drowsy for my kits' apprentice ceremony. Will all of these things - the Dark Forest plans, Ashfur... be gone by then?*

A shiver then ran down my spine. Unfortunately, at the moment, I couldn't be sure.

Chapter 5

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

The sun was already beginning to set, its radiant beams reflecting against the pink and red sky as I comfortably padded through the ThunderClan forest.

Some of the cats dearest to me were at my side, two of them listening eagerly as Lilypetal spoke excitedly about the apprentice she was going to be given in the future. Thornclaw's pale blue eyes were glowing with happiness and pride for his mate, and although Swiftflight wasn't as expressive as his kin, the delight in his gaze was as clear as if he had spoken aloud.

Although the four of us had volunteered to partake in a border patrol, we simultaneously were convening for one of our meetings, which I suppose we had nonverbally agreed to have more of since our first one. *I suppose it's necessary to see if any of us have found out any more about what's coming for us at the moment...* I then couldn't suppress a purr as I shifted my gaze back towards my family. *But getting to catch up with your kin as well is nice too.*

I finally put my word in on my mother's amazing news. "Lilypetal, that's so exciting!"

"-and long overdue!" Thornclaw meowed, flicking Lilypetal's ear with his tail.

Lilypetal flashed each of us a look of gratitude. "Oh, come on. The timing doesn't matter," she insisted cheerfully. "I'm just happy that I'm getting one at all!"

"If only Sorreltail's kits were coming sooner than they were - we could have maybe been mentors together!" I commented, feeling a pang of sadness at that thought. "Cherrypaw will most definitely be a warrior by then."

Beside me, Swiftflight's tail began to twitch back and forth. I shifted over slightly, accommodating with my son's suddenly quicker pace by letting him go in front of me. I then flashed Lilypetal a sympathetic look as I murmured, "I wish that *that* could be the most stressful thing on your mind at the moment, but it's certainly not with these dreams, is it?"

Swiftflight slowed his pace and looked back at Lilypetal with narrowed eyes. "You said that you've seen Ashfur in them?"

Lilypetal slowly nodded in response to his question. "Unfortunately," she muttered through gritted teeth. "I'd recognize that mocking, evil gaze anywhere."

Swiftflight slowed down even more, so that he was now flanking Lilypetal. "What is he doing?" he pressed.

"He's just always... watching. Nothing else," Lilypetal replied, just a glint of fear and anger in her hazel eyes. "At least... that's what he's doing immediately before I leap on the piece of crowfood."

"And then what?" Thornclaw asked after exchanging a half-unnerved, half-amused glance with me.

Lilypetal shrugged, her gaze shifting from Swiftflight, to Thornclaw, and then to me. "That's it, usually. And it drives me crazy," she meowed. "I can tell that with each time I get closer and closer to finishing him off once and for all... but it never comes, leaving me feeling defeated and impatient."

My mother then let out a sigh as she shook her head slowly. "But honestly..." she continued. "I really just think that it's all just channeling my inner thoughts... what I *want* to happen."

"Are you sure?"

All of us nearly stopped in our tracks as we turned to look at Swiftflight, who had spoken, and clearly had something interesting to say.

My son looked baffled as the attention was suddenly turned on him, but after just a heartbeat, his gaze grew calm again as he explained

himself. "I mean... just by the way you described your dreams, I can't help but think..."

"What do you mean, Swiftflight?" I prompted to the dark gray tom once he had trailed off.

Swiftflight sat down, his gaze serious as he stared back at Lilypetal. "Your dreams... they're *vague*, but they're almost simultaneously very vivid, right?"

Lilypetal gave a single sharp nod. "Exactly."

Swiftflight then seemed to be pondering something for a few moments. Even though these dreams, as far as I knew, weren't correlated with me in any way, I found that I was very eager to hear Swiftflight's thoughts.

Just when I thought I was going to have to further prompt him, he finally spoke. "I don't know... from what I've experienced in the Dark Forest, having a dead cat constantly communicating with me, and spending most of my life in a reality that I can only reach through sleep... I don't know if they're *just* dreams," Swiftflight murmured. He then looked up from where he'd been staring at the ground. His gaze was full of curiosity. "Are you sure that someone isn't trying to reach you?"

Lilypetal's eyes widened. "*Reach* me?" she repeated nervously.

"Yes," Swiftflight immediately replied. "Someone... not alive? They may be trying to get a message to you."

A shiver ran down my spine at my son's suggestion. Even though interaction from the dead was how we had come to find out just how strong Ashfur and the Dark Forest were becoming, something as little as what Swiftflight was saying was still bone-chilling to think about.

Lilypetal seemed daunted by the thought as well. She exchanged a nervous look with Thornclaw before letting her gaze fall to the ground, her gaze dark and contemplative. "Wow... I hadn't thought of that, Swiftflight."

"What do you think?" Thornclaw asked his mate, looking down at her.

"I mean, it's a possibility," Lilypetal replied as she raised her head. She then turned to look back at Swiftflight, her eyes grateful. "As smart of an idea that that is, I can't be sure too sure yet," she then meowed. "Thank you for your insight, Swiftflight. I'll definitely keep it in mind."

I couldn't help but feel an immense amount of pride as Swiftflight's intelligence was being noted. *Now that he isn't busy being as cold as possible to every cat around him, he can do more worthwhile things like showing his smarts!*

My mother then stood back up, letting out a quiet purr of amusement. "But who knows? I could be completely blowing these out of proportion."

I'd almost like to hope so... "I guess that only time will tell..." I mewed.

"That's very true," Lilypetal meowed touching her nose to my cheek before all four of us began walking again. "Swiftflight, how have things been since you left the Dark Forest?"

My ears flicked at Lilypetal's question as I realized that I was anxious to know that as well. "Oh, yeah!" I exclaimed, quickening my pace to flank my son. "Have you seen anything? Has Ashfur tried to reach you?"

Beside me, Swiftflight shook his head, to my relief. "No, not much at all," my son answered, his voice husky. "I haven't seen Ashfur's face since I ran away from his sorry pelt, but at the same time, I can almost sense his bitterness. And as much as he may not want to admit it, he hates that I'm not there to be the center of his plan anymore."

My son then took a long, deep breath before going on. His eyes were narrowed and unwavering as he meowed clearly, "But luckily my determination to stay away from the Dark Forest is stronger than Ashfur's determination to keep me there."

I nearly found my eyes welling up with emotion at Swiftflight's words. I could not have been more proud of how much he had learned and grown if I tried. *Thank you, Snowflight.* "Good," I breathed, my voice nearly hoarse with the emotion I felt. I then took a deep breath before repeating, "Good."

Swiftflight's gaze softened as he returned the tender gaze that I was giving him. I then watched as his gray-blue eyes began gleaming with interest. "Have you discussed any more with Jayfeather about Snowstorm?"

I nearly stopped in my tracks once again, and my heart began to beat more quickly as I was overwhelmed with frustration and anxiety. Because the thing was... *no!* We hadn't said a word to each other since the gray tabby snapping turtle had lashed out at me in his den. I'd been too annoyed and nervous to approach Jayfeather since then.

So, I hesitated as I figured out what to tell Swiftflight. "Um... no. No, we haven't," I finally answered. "Jayfeather's been busy lately."

"You know something that I've always thought was very strange?" Thornclaw then meowed. "Jayfeather always seems to know more than he should."

"Honestly, you're right!" Lilypetal replied as she nodded in agreement. "But he's a medicine cat. I would just assume that 'knowing more than others' was just a part of their position?"

That's what I've always just assumed as well... I realized as Thornclaw spoke again. "I suppose so. But if that was the case, why isn't Leafpool in on this too?" he questioned. "How was Jayfeather sure that Snowflight's spirit was in Snowstorm's body?"

"He knew that I was training in the Dark Forest as well," Swiftflight pointed out. "I hadn't even told him."

That's true... but don't medicine cats just know those things? I wondered, but decided not to say it out loud.

"And he always seems so deep in thought, like there's constantly

something brooding on his mind," Thornclaw went on, then proceeding to let out an amused snort. "Maybe it's part of the reason why he's so cranky."

I sniffed almost inaudibly. *If so, that's especially the case right now,* I thought jokingly. *He's so caught up in something that he wouldn't even bother to speak to me!* "Hm, maybe. Can't be sure," I murmured mindlessly in response to Thornclaw's words.

Then, just as we happened to be going deeper into ThunderClan territory after overseeing the WindClan border, I took the lead and called back, "Alright, are we ready to head back?"

Lilypetal quickened her pace and slowed once she was right on my tail. "Sounds good to me!" she answered enthusiastically. "I'm getting hungry, and I'm anxious to hear all about Wrenpaw, Emberpaw and Lightningpaw's day before they head off to sleep!"

"Agreed!" Thornclaw meowed, then padding up to walk beside me. "Let's go."

As we began to make our way back to camp - becoming increasingly more difficult as night fell - I realized just how much of my father's words reflected my own thoughts. I'd never really acknowledged it, but it was always something I had wondered about. Why did Jayfeather know as much as he did? Thornclaw had made a good point - if all-knowingness was something that a medicine cat possessed, why wasn't Leafpool showing any signs that she knew anything that was going on?

So... how did Jayfeather know so much so easily? Did it have something to do with what was going on with him currently?

My mind was swirling with so many thoughts, and I was so caught in them that I was almost unconsciously crawling through the gorse tunnel as we arrived back into camp. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Thornclaw and Lilypetal quickly run over to the fresh-kill pile where Emberpaw, Wrenpaw, and Lightningpaw were sharing a meal. The three young cats immediately stood up and seemed to excitedly begin talking to their parents about their first day of training.

As much as I wanted to hear what my siblings had to say as well, I was much too tired and preoccupied to be able to give them my full attention. After saying goodnight to Swiftflight and watching him crawl into the warriors den, I decided to take a quick walk around the camp in an attempt to clear my head before I went to sleep.

As I was doing so, I nearly flinched and let out a startled yelp as I ran into Hollyleaf, who was making her way back into camp from the dirtplace.

She blinked quickly a few times, clearly startled as well, before giving me a nod of greeting. "Hey, Goldenshine."

My tail suddenly began to twitch anxiously as I realized that I might be able to vent all of my thoughts out right now. There's also the possibility that I might find out what she knows about Jayfeather!

"Hey, Hollyleaf," I meowed to the black she-cat. I then took a step closer to her as I whispered, "Um... can I talk to you?"

Hollyleaf's gaze was immediately filled with confusion. But nevertheless, she complied. "Sure," she answered with a flick of her tail. I then eagerly followed behind the warrior as she led me back out of camp. We ended up settling down next to a small oak tree just a little ways from camp. "What's up?" Hollyleaf prompted as she wrapped her tail around her paws.

I shrugged, having absolutely no idea how to start. "Er... I guess that you know that Jayfeather and I are pretty good friends..."

Hollyleaf snorted after I'd spoken. "Yeah, I do," she replied. "Honestly, I have no idea how you tolerate him so much."

I couldn't help but purr with amusement at Hollyleaf's words. "Well, I'll admit that I'm having a hard time at the moment," I purred, then deciding to cut right to the chase. "You... you seemed like you maybe knew of something that was going on with him, and I'm... *worried*, I guess."

My stomach then seemed to twist up into a knot as Hollyleaf grew silent, her green eyes narrowing.

The only thing that I could think to do was press on. "I mean, is there?" I asked nervously. "Or has he just decided to be extra rude for perks?"

"No... you're right. There's something going on," Hollyleaf replied after a moment.

With that, a rush of determination ran through me. I didn't know *what*, exactly, but I was getting close to something. "Oh, yeah? What?" I asked quickly. I then cut myself off just before I had been about to ask yet another question, knowing that I was taking myself too far. "Sorry..."

I looked back up at Hollyleaf to find that her gaze was thoughtful and amused. "Hm, you've matured in many ways since I first got to know you, but that nosiness of yours has never changed," she purred as she shook her head slowly. "But at the same time, neither has my trust in you."

I returned the teasing look that Hollyleaf was giving me. "Hm, did spending time together in that cave really make me seem that trustworthy?" I asked her as I reflected on probably one of the most exciting times I had experienced as an apprentice - getting stuck in ThunderClan's tunnels after having saved Hollyleaf from its caving stones.

"Believe it or not," Hollyleaf meowed teasingly, nudging me lightly on the shoulder. "In that moment I felt like you were there for me when no one else was." The fluffy black she-cat then sighed and looked down to the ground. "Which is why... I feel like I can tell you..."

I bit my lip to prevent myself from asking endless questions, and simply waited in anticipation.

Hollyleaf looked back up to meet my gaze. "Well, basically... Jayfeather is one piece of a really, really big prophecy."

I couldn't hold back the questions anymore. "A prophecy? What kind of prophecy?"

Hollyleaf sighed as she shrugged and shook her head, her eyes filled with awe. "Honestly, I can't even begin to explain."

So incredibly dumbfounded even with the little information Hollyleaf had told me, I was determined to find out as much as I could. This would surely explain Jayfeather's behavior, *and along with that... maybe the reason why Jayfeather isn't like other medicine cats...* "You said that he was just a part... who else is involved?" I pressed. "How do you know so much about it?"

"Lionblaze and Dovewing," Hollyleaf answered. "The three of them were each given a power that will help them fulfill this prophecy - one that will save the Clans from the... darkness that is upon us.

My eyes widened as big as they ever have as I processed this information. *Wow... Jayfeather's power maybe being some sort of all-knowingness? Looking into cats' minds?* I wondered based on what I knew. *And what does Hollyleaf mean by "darkness that is upon us"? Does she know about the Dark Forest too?*

Before I could further press, the warrior went on. "I know as much as I do because... well, I once thought that I was a part of the prophecy, but I'm not," Hollyleaf explained, and I wondered if I had imagined that flash of bitterness in her eyes.

She then shook her head quickly. "Anyway," she continued, "holding a destiny like Jayfeather, and Lionblaze and Dovewing too, are doing... it ought to be a lot to carry, especially when things have just gotten more complicated."

More complicated? "Complicated?" I repeated out loud. "How so?"

To my complete dismay, Hollyleaf didn't really answer my question. "Jayfeather has a lot on his mind right now," she murmured instead. "I'd be shocked if it *wasn't* putting him in a bad mood."

I then let out a long sigh, realizing that there probably wasn't much more that I was going to be able to pull out of Hollyleaf, and if I tried harder than I already was, then I'd probably just annoy her to death. "Well, you've certainly given me a thorough explanation," I meowed to her.

I can't tell if that was sarcastic or not... I realized to myself. *She did just reveal to me that Jayfeather, Lionblaze and Dovewing hold powers that are meant to help the Clans, yet I still feel as if I know nothing.*

I was then yanked from my thoughts as Hollyleaf gave me another light nudge. "Well, if you can't trust a Clanmate that you were stuck in the tunnels with, who can you trust with that information? And I know that you and Jayfeather are friends, so I suppose that you deserve to know." I then watched, still baffled by all I had been told, as Hollyleaf stood up and began to pad back to camp.

She took a quick pause as she murmured, "I'm his sister, and I can barely keep a conversation with that mouse-brain. What do you all even talk about?"

Yikes... can't tell you that. "Um... well..." I stammered, then proceeding to snort and roll my eyes as a cover as the two of us padded back into camp. "I couldn't even tell you. It feels like we're bickering half of the time!" *Or* all *of the time, rather.*

Hollyleaf let out a quiet purr of amusement as she crawled into the warriors den. "Sounds about right."

I followed just behind her, and then nearly fell down in my nest with how mentally and physically exhausted I was. I scooted over and pressed myself deeply into Dustystorm's fur, my mate already being fast asleep in our nest.

All that Hollyleaf had told me probably wouldn't process for a while. I mean, it was *bizarre. No wonder Jayfeather seemed to have so much on his mind, and along with his destiny with Dovewing and Lionblaze, he's been dealing with the Snowflight situation as well.* I then found that I was feeling quite guilty. *That's... that's a lot. A lot, a lot. Great StarClan, I'd be snappy too!*

I then finally closed my eyes, trying to let myself finally relax and drift off into sleep. *It appears that there are many cats in this Clan that have a crazy destiny ahead of them that they must fulfill.*

Chapter 6

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

My eyelids slowly flew open, and I couldn't help but feel a small rush of panic as the bright rays of the sun leaked through the den walls, indicating that dawn had very-well passed.

But I suppose this hadn't been the first time I'd slept in. Since leaving the Dark Forest, my body had seemed to ask for nothing but sleep considering I was actually receiving the opportunity to get some.

And I had also had a bit of trouble sleeping last night, as I had been stuck in thoughts about the latest meeting with Goldenshine, Thornclaw and Lilypetal, frustrated that nothing new had been discovered about Snowstorm. Shockingly, I had been able to hold my tongue from pressing my mother about talking with Jayfeather.

What does it matter that he's being snappy? I had wondered. *I'm snappy! It took a while, but you comfortably speak with me now!*

I knew that I'd have to be patient, as hard as it would be. But now that I knew about Snowstorm's true identity, now that all of the weird things she thought and said made more sense, I wanted to know everything that was going on with her. *Especially considering that we've established that Snowflight returning had something to do with me...* I thought. *It's still so strange to think about. I've been best friends with kin that I've never met.*

I then sighed as I fully blinked my eyes open for the first time, and then slightly shifted over in my nest to see that Snowstorm was still in her nest. She was awake, lying on her back and staring up at the den roof.

Speaking of that snowball... I purred with amusement and scooted over just a bit so that I was just about a tail-length from her nest.

"Snowstorm, what are you doing?" I asked her, still purring.

Snowstorm didn't look back at me, and continued to simply stare up. "... Lying here," she murmured.

I snorted. "Thank you, that was tough for me to figure out."

Snowstorm finally flashed me an amused look after my sarcastic comment. "I woke up a little past moonhigh," she explained as she sighed. She then proceeded to roll over so that she was lying on her belly. "I've been awake since then."

"You?" I exclaimed, my eyes widening. "But you usually sleep like a rock!" *I could throw you from the top of a cliff and you'd stay asleep... and not just because you'd maybe be dead.*

Snowstorm sniffed and shook her head slowly. "Oh, I know I do," she replied. Her gaze then darkened as she murmured, "But... I had a weird dream. They've been happening a lot, recently."

My whiskers began to twitch, and my eyes narrowed. *Lilypetal's been having unsettling dreams that are keeping her up too...* I recalled. *But Snowstorm has been bothered in her sleep for many moons now; surely there's no correlation.* "But you've always had dreams, haven't you?" I repeated out loud. "What makes these especially strange?"

I then watched, my curiosity rising as Snowstorm sighed and closed her eyes. "Since... since what happened in the Dark Forest, that... *Ashfur* has not left my head," she nearly whispered as she seemed to grow more and more uneasy with each word she spoke. She then quickly shook her head and looked at me with alarm. "I don't mean that in a weird way!"

I had to suppress another purr of amusement. "Thank StarClan," I muttered.

"I mean, that night was really, *really* scary," Snowstorm continued. "Maybe the experience of it is just coming back to haunt me."

I stared back at Snowstorm with wide eyes. "It was *scary?*" I questioned her, genuinely shocked. "Snowstorm, you sure didn't seem scared."

"Really?" Snowstorm exclaimed, her tail beginning to lash back and forth.

"Not at all," I answered despite the prideful, mocking expression that I wanted to slap off of her face. "*I* was scared."

Snowstorm's eyes narrowed as they glimmered with amusement. "I could tell."

I rolled my eyes and stood up. "Gee, thanks," I muttered. Then, as Snowstorm stood up as well, I made sure I had her gaze as we both began to walk out of the warriors den. "Well, either way, I... I can't thank you enough for 'saving' me. Um..."

Snowstorm then seemed to be trying to hold in her laughter as she watched me struggle for more words. "You trying to be vulnerable is quite funny," she commented.

I shot her a warning glare. "And I'd suggest you stop talking about it before I regret doing it at all," I hissed to her, although it was meant to be lighthearted. After Snowstorm sighed and rolled her eyes, I continued. "Thank you for being one of the cats to knock me back into place."

I then looked away from my friend for just a moment as a reoccurring thought crossed my mind once again. I knew that because Snowflight had returned through Snowstorm that she had some sort of destiny she'd had to fulfill, and part of it had been, but how did she *know* to fulfill it in the first place? Did she have any idea of who she really was?

I turned back to Snowstorm. "How did you even get to the Dark Forest?" I asked her.

She seemed daunted by the question. "What do you mean?"

I took a moment to think of how to rephrase my words. "How did you *know* to be there, I guess is my question," I explained. A weird, uneasy pang then seemed to jab at me as I commented more quietly, "You had said that it was your *destiny* to be there." *From that, it definitely sounds like she does know who she is... but that's not*

what I heard from Goldenshine.

I watched, my fur slowly rising with anticipation as Snowstorm seemed to fall into her thoughts. She wasn't even looking at me once she finally spoke. "Well... you know how I'd been having dreams before the fact too, right?"

I snorted in response to that question. "Oh, yes," I muttered. "A couple of times you woke up screaming in my face."

Snowstorm rolled her eyes before finally turning to meet my gaze. "Yeah, those," she confirmed for me, irritably. "I... I saw images of you in the Dark Forest... images of you becoming a vicious, fox-hearted cat."

I broke Snowstorm's gaze and looked down to the ground. *She's saying that as if I wasn't ever a vicious fox-heart,* I thought with shame. *I definitely was.*

"And as if that wasn't enough, I saw the way that you were changing even when I was awake," Snowstorm continued. "You were cold towards nearly everyone, you were rough in training, and rude... you even fought me with unsheathed claws, for StarClan's sake!"

I screwed my eyes shut and nearly had to suppress a hiss. As much as I didn't want to admit it, Snowstorm's reminder of my behavior was hurting me like a physical wound. "I don't need the list..." I muttered, my teeth gritted.

Only then did Snowstorm seem to realize that she had gone a bit far with her words. "Sorry," she meowed as she flashed me a sympathetic look and put the tip of her tail on my shoulder.

I took a deep breath and lifted my head back up. I gave Snowstorm a nod to acknowledge her apology, then lashed my tail to prompt her to go on with her explanation.

"Okay," Snowstorm breathed. "Anyway, I also had dreams of who I now know to be Ashfur, but I didn't recognize him or know who he was, initially." She then narrowed her eyes as she murmured more

quietly, "Yet, for some reason he already seemed familiar the first time I dreamed about him... I don't know."

Hm, I might, I thought ominously. But not wanting to "scare" Snowstorm, I suppose, I didn't tell her that. "I don't know, either," I lied before shifting the subject just a bit. "So, that's why you had recognized him when you came to the Dark Forest."

Snowstorm gave me a single nod. "Yes," she answered. Her gaze then grew darker and sharper. "So... based on these dreams, I felt like I needed to do something about it. Something seemed to be... *calling* me to do something about it.

A shiver ran down my spine at these words.

"And so... " Snowstorm went on. "When I woke up in the Dark Forest one night and eventually found you in that hollow, being praised for the horrible cat you had become..." Snowstorm then cut herself off as she let out a small purr of amusement. She gave me a small nudge on the shoulder. "Well, you know what happened from there."

I nodded slowly as I stared back at Snowstorm with narrowed eyes. "Yeah, I do..." I murmured, but I had barely realized I was even speaking as I began to fall deep into my thoughts.

Now, from what Snowstorm had said, she knew that she had been called to do something, but she still didn't realize that it was because it was what her spirit was supposed to fulfill. *Should... should I tell her what the case actually is?* I wondered, my heart immediately beginning to beat faster at that thought.

I almost instantly decided against it, for many reasons. *I'd need to tell Goldenshine first before doing that,* I realized. *Also, I don't want to freak Snowstorm out of her mind, especially when I don't know much about the situation myself. Goldenshine or Jayfeather should be the one to tell her who she really is.*

I sighed with relief, having decided that I wasn't going to be responsible for flipping my friend's life entirely upside down.

I then turned back to look at Snowstorm and let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I noticed how tired and heavy her blue eyes looked. She had definitely zoned out when I'd been stuck in my own thoughts. "Uh... Snowstorm?" I purred as I waved my tail in front of her face. "Maybe you should go back to the warriors den and get some sleep."

Snowstorm blinked a few times, looked back at me, and gave me a nod. "You don't have to tell me twice!" she meowed before her mouth opened up into a yawn. She had just begun to turn around before she paused and looked back at me. "By the way, don't think that this was a one-time thing."

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. "What was?"

Snowstorm purred with amusement as she fully turned back around. "Me coming to your rescue, I guess," she meowed. Her gaze was warm as she then nudged me lightly with her shoulder. "I'm trying to say that I'm always here for you, you mouse-brain!"

I snorted and rolled my eyes as Snowstorm stepped back. "Well, I get that *now!*" I exclaimed, half-annoyed and half-amused. I then took a deep breath before returning Snowstorm's warm gaze. "But thanks. The same goes to you."

Snowstorm gave me the lightest nod as her blue eyes glowed with pride. "I'm glad to say that I completely believe you," she whispered. She then gave me one last proud look before beginning to walk away again. "Bye, Swiftflight!"

"Bye, birdbrain!" I called back to her.

Snowstorm paused for just a moment. "Rabbit-breath!" she teasingly scoffed at me before purring and making her way into the warriors den.

I sniffed and narrowed my eyes as I watched her tail disappear. "Rabbit-breath?" I muttered to myself, confused, before deciding to shrug off the random insult and see what patrols were heading out.

"Swiftflight!"

I stopped almost at once as I heard a voice call my name from

behind me, and I turned to see that Rosepetal was quickly approaching me. I turned towards the dark-cream she-cat and gave her a nod in greeting.

She stopped just in front of me and peered past my shoulder. "Where is Snowstorm going?"

I looked back towards where Snowstorm had disappeared before facing Rosepetal again. "Oh, she didn't get much sleep last night, so I sent her back to the warriors den to rest."

Rosepetal's eyes flashed with surprise as she looked back at me. "Oh, really?" she questioned. "That's a shame."

I couldn't help but purr just a bit as I wondered what could possibly be so shameful about Snowstorm getting to catch up on her sleep. "How come?" I asked Rosepetal.

Rosepetal sat down as she began to explain. "Well, Firestar was wanting some of the newer warriors to oversee an apprentice training session - I suppose to gain some experience for when they become warriors!" she told me excitedly. She then seemed to light up even more, as if an idea had occurred to her. "Even though Snowstorm can't make it, you can still come!"

I immediately let out a disgusted, alarmed hiss as I backed away just a pawstep. "Are you kidding?" I growled back at Rosepetal. "There are countless amounts of things to do in this Clan that are worth my time, and unfortunately, your idea doesn't fall into such a category!" I then whipped myself around in frustration. *Watching apprentices train? What a load of foxdung...*

After just a moment, I let out another hiss - not out of anger of what Rosepetal had asked me, but at myself. *What am I doing?* I thought as I was suddenly overwhelmed with shame and guilt. *This isn't what you think - it's what Ashfur has taught you to think, and it's not right.*

I took a deep breath and hesitantly turned back to look at Rosepetal, who was luckily still there. *This is a good opportunity to learn what being a Clan cat truly is*, I told myself.

Obviously, I now wanted to take back my words as soon as possible, but Rosepetal beat me to it. Her amber eyes were narrowed as she muttered tautly, "For some reason, I am not surprised that you'd say that." She then turned around and began to pad away.

I urgently followed after her. "Rosepetal, wait!" I called after the warrior before managing to intercept her. "Is there any chance that you could forget everything that I just said?"

I watched nervously as Rosepetal stared back at me, her gaze unreadable. "It may take a bit," she murmured bitterly, although there was a glimmer of humor in her eyes.

I gave her a single sharp, enthusiastic nod. "Sufficient enough for me," I purred, shrugging. "Count me in."

To my relief, Rosepetal's eyes brightened at my words. "Great," she purred back before padding past me and towards the camp entrance. "Follow me - the others are already on their way to the training hollow."

I began to trot just behind her as we crawled through the gorse tunnel. "The 'others', being...?" I prompted to Rosepetal, wondering who I was going to be watching for a bit of the day.

Rosepetal didn't look back to answer me, as she was focused on navigating her path. "Oh, just Goldenshine, me, and the older apprentices - Molepaw and Cherrypaw."

My ears perked up and my tail began to twitch at the warrior's words. "Sounds good to me," I breathed as I followed Rosepetal more excitedly through the forest.

Chapter 7

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

The gorse tunnel was practically a blur as I dashed through it and into ThunderClan camp. The prey I was holding - a mouse and a finch - were hitting my chin against the wind in my run.

Because yes, I was *running*. Running like I never had before. I had to skid to a halt, resulting in me nearly falling on my face as I arrived at the fresh-kill pile. Almost as soon as I had stopped, I turned around to face the amused gazes of Whitewing, Brackenfur, and Blossomfall, who had been following just a bit behind me.

"Great StarClan, Lilypetal!" Whitewing purred as she padded up to stand beside me. "The fresh-kill pile isn't going anywhere!"

I purred with amusement, finally setting my prey down so that I could catch my breath. "What is it with some cats?" I meowed breathlessly, my tone lighthearted. "Moving quickly is somehow seen as something that should be judged!"

Brackenfur exchanged a humored glance with Whitewing. "Well, I suppose she's not hurting anyone!" the golden brown tabby tom pointed out.

I gave him a sharp nod as I continued to purr. "Precisely!" I exclaimed. "Besides, I've had this pent-up energy inside of me for moons now!"

After my comment, I turned away from the three other cats for the briefest moment just to let out a contemptuous sniff. *And being a warrior again is only a portion of it. Some of it is not necessarily good energy...*

Quickly pushing down my angry and bitter thoughts, ones that often tried to make their appearance, I then turned back to the

hunting patrol to share one last *mrrow* of laughter before all of us dispersed. Blossomfall padded off to speak with Ivypool, and Whitewing grabbed a squirrel that I assumed she was going to share with her mate, Birchfall, who was already waiting for her near the Highledge.

I was watching the white she-cat pad off when I suddenly felt a tail lightly begin to nuzzle my head. A bit startled, I turned my head slightly to meet the friendly amber gaze of Brackenfur. Once I had glanced at him, he gave me a single nod before trotting towards the nursery.

I couldn't help but feel warmed by the small affectionate gesture from the tom, one who was kin to me, but not by blood. *And soon one of his kits will be my apprentice!* I thought happily. I then felt my whiskers begin to twitch skeptically and my unsheathed claws sink anxiously into the ground. *Well, I hope...*

I then screwed my eyes shut, let out a hiss and shook my head quickly. *Great StarClan! Lately, every time I think of something that should be exciting, it always has to be followed by a "maybe not" or a "I* hope *that it happens". Potentially scary things are coming soon, but it's not the end of the world!*

I then flicked my ears. ...*What if it is?*

I let out an annoyed huff immediately after this thought. "For StarClan's sake," I muttered irritably to myself, my teeth bared as I began to pad towards a log near the camp entrance.

Recently, any thought of the Dark Forest, Ashfur, or my dreams that crossed my mind made me feel like my head was turning into a wild river - unable to get out of it very easily, and plunging deeper and deeper into the water the more that I flowed with it, making it harder to escape.

This meant that I needed to keep myself busy. So, I had decided that I would finally take the time to set a nest for Thornclaw and me in the warriors den - I had the time, and he was currently out on patrol.

After the two of us had talked to Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw and Emberpaw about their first day of training - one that had gone exceptionally well, by the way - we'd been too tired, and it had been a bit too late to fix a nest. So, we'd spent one last night in our nest in the nursery. *But we can't take up that space anymore, not when Sorreltail needs it now!*

I managed to have a little pep in my step as I arrived to log that was the home to much of ThunderClan's needed moss. I grabbed quite a few clumps, having to estimate about how much I'd actually need for an entire nest.

Once I had so much moss that my mouth was full, I began to travel across the camp towards the warriors den.

I narrowed my eyes and let out a small grunt through my full mouth as a thought crossed my mind. *Hm, I wonder what Ashfur thinks of me moving back to the warriors den, or the kits becoming apprentices?* I contemplated. *I bet he's intimidated that they aren't little kits anymore! He's never going to set a claw near them again.*

I then felt a nervous pang in my heart. *At least... I don't think he will, I thought nervously. I then let out a quiet hiss. I won't let him. But my kits could shred him to bits on their own, if they wanted to! But I'd want to do it instead. Will I get the chance to? What if-*

I was then... *thankfully*... yanked away from my thoughts as my vision was then overtaken by a flash of black and brown. I let out a startled yelp, the moss falling out of my mouth, and leaped back, to see that I had bumped into Spiderleg in the midst of my angry, anxious thoughts.

I knew that I'd immediately have to apologize, or I'd be left to face Spiderleg's earful of infuriated, snarky comments. Even though I'd probably get them, anyway. "Oh my goodness, I'm sorry, Spiderleg!"

The black and brown tom lashed his tail with a hiss. His teeth were gritted as he muttered, "Still having trouble navigating around this camp?"

I sniffed with amusement. I was practically made of stone when it

came to rude comments that cats like Spiderleg would throw at me. "Excuse me?" I meowed, laughter in my voice. "I don't know if running into a cat counts as a navigational error!"

Spiderleg let out another quiet hiss as he began to pad past me. "You taking the path towards ThunderClan territory as a kittypet all of those moons ago was a navigational error."

I tried to suppress another purr of amusement as I watched the tom walk off. "Speaking of that - you were one of the first cats that I met when I joined ThunderClan," I murmured half to myself. "I have to say - my first impression of you has not changed one bit."

I then turned away from the tom and picked up my moss in order to continue my travel towards the warriors den. "Sorry for running into you!" I called back just before crawling through the entrance.

My eyebrows raised as soon as I took a gander at the inside. *This den has definitely expanded since I was last here!* I realized. *Well... so has ThunderClan, I suppose. We're huge, for StarClan's sake!*

I trotted over to the first space that caught my eye and dropped my moss down onto the ground. Just as I had begun to spread the moss out, my ears flicked as I heard pawsteps come from the entrance to the den.

I turned my head to see that Squirrelflight had paused at the den and was now making her way inside. "Well, it's about time that you returned to this den!" the dark ginger she-cat purred.

I gave her an eager, friendly nod in greeting as she came to sit down beside me. "Agreed!" I purred back to her. "As much as I'm going to miss my three little furballs, they were getting too big for me to even move half a mouse tail's length in my nest!"

I then raised my eyebrows as Squirrelflight bent down and picked up my moss without hesitation. I then watched as she proceeded to carry it away. "What are you doing?" I asked her, surprised and amused.

Squirrelflight proceeded to drop the moss in another space a couple

of tail-lengths away. "I'm putting your nest next to mine and Brambleclaw's, you mouse-brain!" Her green eyes glittered as she spoke.

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter at the she-cat's answer. "Why, of course! We might as well drive Brambleclaw and Thornclaw crazy once again by how much we whisper to each other when we're supposed to be asleep!" I meowed cheerfully, then letting out a long sigh as I met Squirrelflight's gaze. "It's been a long time coming."

Squirrelflight's eyes were bright, but solemn as she nodded and padded up to me. "It really has."

"I've missed you," I meowed to her.

"I've missed you too."

I couldn't help but feel a small twinge of sadness at this exchange. Yes, Squirrelflight and I had always been close friends, but since I had gone to the nursery expecting my second litter, recovering from my kitting, and then grieving for Mistpelt (one out of those three, I was still doing), and since Squirrelflight had become busier as a senior warrior, we'd had a hard time *making* time to talk.

I began to shake my head slowly as I looked back at Squirrelflight. "Do you even remember the last time we were on patrol together?"

"Great StarClan, no!" Squirrelflight replied, her eyes wide. "I feel like you were in the nursery forever!"

You and me, both. "For sure!" I replied in place of my thoughts. "Well, I can assure you that Thornclaw and I are back for good!"

Squirrelflight snorted. "He'll probably second-guess that come moonhigh when the two of us don't shut up."

After the two of us shared a moment of laughter, Squirrelflight went on. "Speaking of patrol, I've actually already been assigned to lead a border patrol before dusk," she mewed. "I'm thinking of taking Firestar and Brambleclaw with me - do you want to come along?"

I was immediately overwhelmed with warmth at this prospect.

"That's a hypothetical question, right?" I exclaimed teasingly.

Squirrelflight purred with amusement. "Great! I'll see you then!" she meowed cheerfully before standing up and beginning to walk out of the den. I raised my eyebrows as she then paused and looked back at me.

"You're right - this is a long time coming," she meowed, winking. "I should definitely be spending more time with my hero - the cat who practically saved my fur all of those moons ago!"

I then stood still, my eyes wide and staring straight ahead as Squirrelflight disappeared from my sight. The she-cat's words were already echoing in my mind. I should definitely be spending more time with my hero - the cat who practically saved my fur all of those moons ago!

My fur began to tingle, and a shiver ran down my spine. *Me saving Squirrelflight's fur, although infinitely worth saving, was how all of this started, wasn't it? Ashfur was going to reveal Jayfeather's, Hollyleaf's and Lionblaze's real parents to make her suffer, but stopped him...* I realized. *Ashfur's... love for Squirrelflight was what brought him to want to bring harm to others in the first place, and I was the one to keep him from it.*

I let out a huff and shook my head as I padded up to my newly set nest. *Wow*, I thought as I reflected on my latest realization. *I wonder if Squirrelflight knows what has happened since then? Is it about time that I tell her?*

As soon as one of my paws touched my nest, I practically let myself fall into it. *I don't want Squirrelflight to think that anything that Ashfur has inflicted on me is her fault...* I thought worriedly. *But she might know something about Ashfur that I don't...*

I let out a yawn before curling up into a tight ball. *Goodness, I don't even know where I'd start...*

Then, I let my eyelids slowly fall closed. I had gone to my new nest to simply think for a bit, but I had just now realized how exhausted I was. Anyway, naps hadn't been much of an option when I was in

the nursery watching the kits. I was going to take advantage of this free time that I had.

But unfortunately, it didn't look like I was necessarily going to get any "rest".

My eyes almost instantly opened again, and I found that I had fallen into yet another one of my weird, vivid dreams. *Dang it.*

I felt the sun warming up my shoulders as beams fell onto my back. I could see tall, linked planks and pillars practically towering over me. Beneath me, I could feel the rough, uncomfortable texture of wood.

I was on a porch. One that I recognized very well.

I then nearly let out a surprised yelp as something quickly rolled up to be - what I recalled to be a ball of yarn. I blinked back at it a few times, surprised and weirded-out to see a toy I hadn't thought I'd ever see again.

I then managed to be more surprised as I looked up to see another cat, the one I had expected to, staring back at me. I instantly recognized the cream tabby pelt of one of my kittypet friends - Maddie. She had lived just across the road from me, and I often came down to visit her and play with yarn on her housefolk's front porch.

The familiarity of my old friend gave me the strangest sense of warmth. But for some reason, as I got a better look at her, I became worried as I noticed the alarm in her wide green eyes.

What in the name of the Dark Forest is going on? I wondered nervously. *What have I fallen into?*

This vision, *dream...* - I didn't know - almost seemed to answer my questions, as Maddie began to speak. "Wow, Lily-"

Oh my goodness, gross. I had to keep myself from cringing at the sound of my kittypet name.

"You're just joking, right?" Maddie then meowed over my thoughts.

Joking? I repeated to myself. *What am I joking about? I can joke, but I'd like to know* why *I'm joking.*

"Nothing good ever comes out of going into those woods," Maddie went on, her usually soft voice actually somewhat sharp.

Ooooh, that's what this is. One of the many attempts I made with my kittypet friends to see what they thought of me going off into the forest... towards what I knew to be Clan territory at the time.

I then my heart practically skip a beat as I began to *speak*. I hadn't wanted to speak, but it appeared as if I was watching this scene unfold before me from inside of myself. I was myself and in my own body, yet I was simply a spectator at the moment.

"There's more to the woods than just danger and vicious creatures!" I demanded to Maddie as I pushed the yarn back to her. I then let my head fall to the ground as I seemed to be questioning my own comment. "Well... I think."

Maddie rolled her eyes and lashed her tail with annoyance. "See? You don't even know what's out there!" the she-cat insisted. "None of us do."

I almost felt the wave of determination that surely was rushing through my kittypet-self. "What if I were to just take a peek?" I pressed.

"So what?" Maddie replied, her voice raising with fear. "What if you never came back? Your housefolk would be heartbroken!"

I then felt my present-self begin to prickle with irritation as I watched myself seem to pull back. "Yeah..." I breathed, turning away from Maddie briefly. "Well, I *was* joking... so it wouldn't matter, anyway."

Hm, that's a load of foxdung, Lily - and you know it.

I then watched as Maddie gave a single nod of satisfaction. "Thank gosh," she purred just before a call seemed to come from inside the house, and she urgently stood up. "I gotta go. Dinner's ready!"

My gaze followed the cream she-cat as she trotted excitedly into her house through her cat door. "Bye, Maddie!" I called out to her before standing up myself. I then let out a long, sad sigh as I turned my head towards the Thunderpath and Twoleg nests up ahead.

Just behind this though, were the tall oak trees that made up the forest. Beyond that, I knew now, had been the Clan territories. I had felt a tug towards those trees for as long as I could remember.

Obviously now, I know why - It's where I belong. I realized, not being able to help feeling a twinge of pride and happiness as I reflected on how much I had thrived as a wild cat. *I-*

My own thoughts were then interrupted as I felt that I was practically physically *tugged* out of this vision. Everything - the porch, the Twoleg nest, the Thunderpath, the trees - had all instantly disappeared.

Now, I was in completely different surroundings. Unfortunately, surroundings I knew quite well. *If any woods* do *apply to having just danger and vicious creatures, this would be the one.*

I almost felt *annoyed* to realize that I was in the Dark Forest once again. I'd seen it way more times that I'd like, lately. But it didn't take me long to notice that something felt... *off.*

This didn't feel like a vivid dream as the others had. I knew that I was dreaming, yet it felt as real as if I was awake.

Then suddenly, just as I was staring up at the dark, looming, leafless trees, I felt my fur began to bristle as I felt the strong premonition of a cat standing beside me. Ashfur's horrible stench then began to flood through my nose.

I couldn't see him, yet for some reason, I felt so sure that I could whip myself around and leap at him - end this once and for all, and it would be *real* this time.

He might as *well* have been there - his presence felt so incredibly tangible, and the idea of defeating him did too. It was almost like I was staring at the end of a thin tunnel, because it was all that was

on my mind.

And just as I felt a wave of determination, wiping away any fear that I'd maybe felt, my eyes flew open, and I was back in my new nest once again. Outside, I could tell that just a bit of time had passed - dusk was approaching.

I nearly wanted to slash at my moss out of frustration. *Not again...* The same feelings were happening all over again - those horrible feelings of anger, impatience, and disappointment that always lingered after these dreams.

But along with those, this one also came with a strong feeling of uneasiness. This dream, both the flashback and the Dark Forest "visit", had been so vivid.

I had been so sure that Ashfur had been standing right beside me - just as he had when we'd talked in the Dark Forest before, and faced off at the border between StarClan and the Dark Forest.

And I'd practically been *pulled* from my flashback as a kittypet to be in the Dark Forest. This was usually how it went when this sort-of pattern of dreams occurred, but the switch had felt more forced and abrupt with each time.

Just the fact that there was a pattern in the first place was odd on its own... it almost felt like a message.

I then felt a twinge of alarm. *What if Swiftflight is right?* I wondered, reflecting on the words of the dark gray tom, who had voiced his opinion on my dreams to me. *What if someone is trying to tell me something? What if someone is trying to reach me?*

Chapter 8

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

In the distance, I could just barely see the shimmering lake, lit to the point of being able to blind a cat because of the brightness of the sun. Not only was the sun's light and warmth falling onto the lake, but it thankfully was warm against my own back as I stood in the shaded training hollow.

Rosepetal, Cherrypaw, Molepaw and I had only just begun our battle training session, but the two apprentices made teaching so easy, I felt as if we had accomplished so much already.

Swiftflight, who was watching our session was settled down in the hollow just a few tail-lengths away. He had emerged into the hollow soon after we had, and explained that Firestar had wanted some of the new warriors to watch mentors train their apprentices.

Currently, the dark gray warrior was watching, intrigued and amused, as Molepaw attempted the half-turn belly rake. The brown and cream tom had made his way to Cherrypaw's underbelly, where he proceeded to paw at it lightly with sheathed claws.

I exchanged an impressed, satisfied glance with Rosepetal as he then swiftly rolled over and leaped back onto all fours. "How was that?" he asked, his eyes wide with excitement.

"As close to perfection as you could get, Molepaw," Rosepetal immediately commented, padding up to give her apprentice a light flick on the ear with her tail. "Great job!"

I met the young tom's gaze and gave him an approving nod. "Looked great from over here, too!" I praised to Molepaw, then glancing over at where Cherrypaw was sitting patiently, her eyes glowing with pride for her brother. "Alright, Cherrypaw - are you ready to try it?"

Cherrypaw's eyes managed to light up even more as she gave me an eager nod. "Of course I am!" she exclaimed as she did a few quick hops of exhilaration.

Swiftflight let out a quiet purr of amusement from his spot at the side of the hollow.

I looked back at my son and met his humored gaze for a moment before returning to Cherrypaw. "Alright, knock yourself out!" I meowed encouragingly to my apprentice. When Cherrypaw flashed me a half-humored, half-confused look, I recanted my words. "Well... you know, don't do *that*."

Cherrypaw purred as she gave me another eager nod. "Got it!" the ginger she-cat exclaimed. She then crouched down low, and I wasn't surprised to see that she had seemed to take a quick, nervous glance at Swiftflight before she finally burst forward.

I let out another sniff at this. *Swiftflight willingly watching apprentice training is amazing to me. He's already come so far...* I thought to myself, *but I do wonder if it was a good idea for him to be around Cherrypaw... and Cherrypaw to be around him? It might be a distraction.* Based on what I knew - Cherrypaw showing some clear admiration for my son, I had been prepared to snap her back into focus if needed.

But luckily, Swiftflight's presence didn't seem to be messing with Cherrypaw much at all. I watched as she quickly and confidently went low to the ground, rolled over and then slipped under Molepaw's belly. She repeated the move as her brother had done it, her amber eyes determined.

She then attempted to roll out from under him, and I felt my tail twitch and my eyes narrow as she seemed to slip and stand back up awkwardly.

Once she had found her footing, she let out a frustrated huff and shook out her fur. "Foxdung!" she cursed, sounding more disappointed in herself than angry. "I have a bit of trouble getting back up on my paws after the belly slash."

I purred with amusement. Cherrypaw was acting as regretful as if she had let an intruder get away, or had lost a piece of prey. "That's alright!" I meowed kindly, instantly wanting to reassure my apprentice. I padded up to her and gave her a quick lick on the ear. "Otherwise, you did it perfectly. We'll just work on that one piece!"

I then happened to glance over to Swiftflight, whose gaze was warmly but intently resting on Cherrypaw. "I may have an idea..." he murmured, half to himself. He then shifted his gaze over to me. "Do you mind if I give a tip?"

I hesitated for just a brief moment, but it didn't take me long to realize that Swiftflight might actually know some very helpful things that I didn't. Unfortunately, they hadn't come from a good place at all, but they surely were beneficial, nevertheless. *And Swiftflight did assist me in training Cherrypaw one morning while I went to talk to Jayfeather,* I recalled. *They both came back with fur flat and in one piece... they seemed to work well together.*

Coming to a decision after some thought, I gave my son a single nod. "No, I don't mind at all," I replied to him, giving him an approving nod. I then looked over at Cherrypaw to make sure that she was okay with it. "Cherrypaw?"

Not surprisingly to me at all, my apprentice seemed to be suppressing a mix of nerves and excitement. She nodded to me, her tail twitching. "Yeah!" she purred before glancing shyly towards Swiftflight. "That's fine."

At Cherrypaw's words, Swiftflight immediately stood up. "Okay," he meowed as he began to pad up to Cherrypaw. He briefly glanced over at Molepaw, who was already beginning to practice the move on his own while Rosepetal yowled a tip at him every few heartbeats.

"Well, Goldenshine was right - before you slipped on your paws, you had done the move perfectly," my son explained as he stopped to stand next to Cherrypaw. "I think I have a suggestion that might be an easy fix - rather than lying on your back to slash at your opponent, you could do it from a really low crouch instead.

Cherrypaw, who had been staring eagerly and intensely at Swiftflight as he'd spoken, then quickly went down into her hunter's crouch. "Like this?" she asked Swiftflight, her eyes bright and hopeful as she looked up at him.

Swiftflight stared back at her as he purred with amusement. "It might have to be a little more complicated than that," he answered as he continued to purr. I then watched, surprised and intrigued, as he then sat down and put his front paws on Cherrypaw's shoulders.

He then gently pushed them down, then pausing and worriedly meeting Cherrypaw's gaze briefly to make sure that she was okay with what he was doing. Once Cherrypaw had given him the nod of consent, he went on. "Remember - you're aiming for the cat's underbelly, so there's not a lot of room," he continued to explain. "You'll need to keep yourself as low as possible. It will also make it easier for you to claw upwards in that position."

Swiftflight then proceeded to place one of his paws on Cherrypaw's back, and lightly push it closer to the ground as he had done with her shoulders. "There you go," he then meowed before pulling his paws away. "Maybe try it that way, and you can comfortably leap back up onto your paws."

After Swiftflight's words, Cherrypaw stayed in the low, crouched position that he had set for her, shifting from side to side as if to get used to it. "Okay! I will," she purred. I then had to hold back a gasp as the ginger she-cat stood up and gave my son a quick lick on the cheek. "Thank you."

Swiftflight seemed just as surprised by the gesture. After Cherrypaw had pulled away, he stared straight ahead and blinked quickly a few times as if his whole life had flashed before his eyes. He then shook his head quickly after a few moments and simply gave his Clanmate a nod, his eyes glowing.

I had simply stared and watched the whole encounter, trying to suppress the smirk emerging on my face.

I then pulled my focus back to training and turned to face my apprentice. "Alright, are you up to trying again, Cherrypaw?"

Cherrypaw gave Swiftflight one more shy look before nodding eagerly at me. "Yes!" she exclaimed, then whipping herself around to call out to her brother. "Get back here, you furball! I'm trying the move again, and I'm going to get it this time!"

Molepaw stood up from where he'd been practing a crouch and gave his sister a snort. He then began to pad up to her as he lashed his tail back and forth. "Okay," he meowed, his voice skeptical, but teasing. "Whatever you say-"

Molepaw was then interrupted as Cherrypaw abruptly leaped forward and quickly slithered under her brother's belly. She crouched as low as she could, copying the position that Swiftflight had taught her as she batted at Molepaw's belly.

I could already tell that Swiftflight had definitely been onto something with his idea, even before Cherrypaw had attempted to stand up - crouching down was a more fastened position, thus making it easier for a cat to use their claws.

My heart was welling up with pride as Cherrypaw then ducked and gracefully leaped out from under Molepaw. She skidded to a halt and immediately looked over to me, her eyes wide and shining. "So?" she asked me, her voice nearly a squeal. "How was that?"

I nodded back at my apprentice. "It was great, Cherrypaw!" I meowed cheerfully. "Great job. Once you get used to the movement, it will be even better. Keep practicing!"

Cherrypaw let out a loud gasp at my words, and she hopped up in the air once again. "Yay!" she exclaimed happily. She then shyly glanced at Swiftflight. "Thank you, again."

Swiftflight, his eyes glowing with admiration, stood up from where he'd been spectating the mock-fight. "Sure," he murmured.

Cherrypaw and Molepaw then proceed to practice the move on their own. Rosepetal settled down beside me so that we could oversee them together, and we'd only been doing this for a few heartbeats when I noticed Swiftflight padding up to me.

I began to fill up with pride all over again as I relived my son's latest actions in my mind. *He has so much potential for so many things - being a great mentor being one of them - but he's never had the opportunity to show it. Or rather, he's never* let *himself have the opportunity to show it.*

I flashed my son an approving look as he sat down beside me. "Not bad," I murmured to him. "It looks like you're actually getting something out of this."

Swiftflight was watching Cherrypaw and Molepaw, his gaze ahead as he replied to me. "Trying to," he meowed.

I gave him a light nudge on the shoulder. "Well, I'm glad."

"Me too," my son sighed. He still hadn't averted his gaze from the apprentices, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was focused on *one* in particular...

Just before I had been about to wave my tail in front of him to get his attention, his gaze fell to the ground. "Um..."

"Yes?" I prompted, my eyebrows raising.

Swiftflight hesitated for a few heartbeats. "Well, just..." he finally stammered. He then lifted his head to meet my gaze. "If you ever need me to help you train Cherrypaw... or if you even need me to do it *for* you one day..."

One of my eyebrows raised higher while the other lowered down. "Oh?"

As much as I wanted to press my son further about the meaning behind his words, I cut myself off as I noticed his ears prick, and his gray-blue eyes flashed with alarm.

He then raised his muzzle up in the air. "Hey, do you smell that?" Before I could even reply to him, he lifted his head higher in the air and gaped his mouth open.

I then quickly grew uneasy as Swiftflight let out a quiet hiss and took a single step back, his fur beginning to bristle. "Fox," he

muttered sharply. "It's close."

My heart suddenly felt like it was pounding out of my chest. "Fox?" I repeated, my voice hoarse with panic.

Swiftflight, to my surprise, almost looked too daunted to reply. But it didn't take me long to realize why as I began to recall the surely traumatizing experience he'd had with a fox as a kit.

What a helpless little idiot he had been, I thought to myself as I gaped my mouth as well, trying to detect what Swiftflight clearly was already. *Thank StarClan we had found him when we did, or he maybe wouldn't be standing next to me right now.*

These thoughts then immediately flew away as the very obvious scent of fox made its way into my nostrils. *Foxdung!* I cursed. *Wait... no, we don't want that right now.*

I frantically began to turn to Rosepetal to give her a warning, but she was already a few steps ahead of me, as she had already padded past Cherrypaw and Molepaw and was looking deeper into the forest, her nose up in the air.

The two apprentices didn't seem aware of what was going on until the dark cream she-cat gave them a hiss. "Hush it, you two!"

Molepaw currently had Cherrypaw pinned down. He turned his head towards his mentor but kept his grip on his sister. "What?" he asked, then releasing Cherrypaw. "What's going on?"

I felt fur brush against mine as Swiftflight slowly began to slither forward to stand with Rosepetal. "There's a fox in our territory," I quickly explained as I tried my hardest to ignore my own fear. "We're going to have to-"

My words were cut off by a gasp from Cherrypaw. I looked up urgently, and my heart nearly dropped as I caught glimpse of the tawny creature emerging through the bushes. My fur began to bristle as I observed its vicious demeanor and dark eyes that revealed nothing but malice. It proceeded to let out the most bone-chilling, disgusting growl that I had ever heard.

I ran up to stand with the two other warriors as fast as I could, and then whipped my head around to look at the apprentices. "Cherrypaw, Molepaw - get into the brambles - *now!*"

Thank StarClan, the two younger cats immediately complied, turning around and bursting into the brambles and out of sight. After I made sure that the two were out of harm's way, I exchanged a fearful, but determined glance with Rosepetal and Swiftflight, and we bunched close together and bristled out our fur in order to look more intimidating.

We slowly began to advance on it, actually somewhat succeeding in getting the fox to take a few pawsteps back.

Obviously, this wasn't going to work for very long. Swiftflight, being aware of this, made the first swipe and managed to claw the horrible creature across the muzzle. I let out a battle cry before leaping on the fox's back, and I could just barely see Rosepetal whipping around to go to its back.

We inflicted whatever harm we could despite the fox's resistance. After what only felt like a moment, I nearly lost my footing as the fox began to run away. I leaped off of the creature, and joined Swiftflight and Rosepetal as we began to chase it off.

Yes, that's right! I thought, my heart filling up with as the fox pelted deeper and deeper into the forest, and closer and closer to the end of our border. *Go back to the yucky place that you came from, you crowfood-eating ball of dung!*

I then let out a gasp of surprise as Swiftflight ran past both Rosepetal and me. He easily caught up to the fox, leaped into the air, and gave it one last slash on its flank before it let out another pained yelp and disappeared among the trees.

The three of us slowly came to a stop, not speaking for a few heartbeats as we tried to catch our breath.

"Great StarClan..." Rosepetal breathed, still staring off at the place that the creature had disappeared. "Is it gone?"

"We can only hope," I replied, my voice not much more than a whisper. I then glanced over at Swiftflight, who was breathing heavily still, his eyes filled with anger and fatigue.

I briefly touched the tip of my tail to his shoulder and flashed him a look of approval and pride, before beginning to run deeper into ThunderClan territory. "Come on - let's get back to Molepaw and Cherrypaw. They're probably scared out of their fur!"

With those words, the three of us urgently started our return to the training hollow. We were going as quickly as we could, but unfortunately fighting a gosh-darn *fox* had dampened our energy.

Before the hollow was even in our sight, my heart practically stopped as I heard a very loud, terrified yowl that clearly came from Cherrypaw. I nearly stopped in my tracks out of fear as I exchanged a nervous glance with Rosepetal. Had the fox already made a comeback?

My head then whipped over to Swiftflight as I heard him let out an enraged yowl, and as we began to run, I realized that I had never actually seen him look this angry - his fur was bristling, his claws were already unsheathed, and his teeth were bared as a growl continued to rise in his throat.

Although Rosepetal and I were running fast, he easily made his way ahead of us, running as... *swiftly* as I had ever seen him. It actually took me a moment to remember that this shouldn't have been to surprise to me, as his father, Breezepelt, was a WindClan cat.

I managed to grow even more afraid as I realized that Swiftflight was going to be the first to face the fox, which was the last thing that I wanted, but it unfortunately appeared as if it was going to happen.

As we continued to run, I turned my head to look at Rosepetal, trying to think quickly. "The three of us clearly isn't enough to get this fox away," I meowed loudly to her over the wind of our travel. "Go to camp and get a patrol together. Quick!"

Rosepetal didn't reply, simply giving me a sharp nod and veering off

of course towards camp. I watched her go for just a heartbeat before picking up speed, determined to leap in and help Swiftflight as soon as I could.

After what had felt like an eternity of pelting through the forest, I finally burst into the clearing of the training hollow.

Just as I had feared, just little ways away was Swiftflight, his dark gray pelt mingling with bright red as he clawed and slashed at the fox.

Great StarClan, no! I let out a horrified gasp and continued to run forward. "Swiftflight, what are you doing?" I yowled out to my son. "Are you crazy?"

Swiftflight didn't shift his gaze from his opponent as he sunk his claws into its back. "Maybe," he hissed, his eyes blaring with rage.

I finally made my way to where my son and the fox were fighting one-on-one. Just as I had been about to leap and make my attack, I cringed back as the fox snapped its large jaws, swiping its head around to aim for Swiftflight.

This only seemed to give my son more of the adrenaline that he needed. He lifted a single unsheathed paw in the air, letting out a determined, triumphant growl before slashing it across the creature's face once again. He then leaped off of its back as it began to give chase.

Swiftflight had clearly given the fox some harsh wounds while I wasn't there, as it was very clearly weakened - limping as it continued to flee. Swiftflight only seemed to feel obligated to chase after it for a few moments before letting it disappear out into the forest once again. "And stay out, you worthless lump of fur!" he called out.

My worry about the fox almost instantly left my mind as I frantically ran up to my son. "Swiftflight, are you alright?" I asked him, my voice shaking as I brushed my tail along his dark gray flank.

Swiftflight didn't seem to be focused on me, or even his own wounds. After he'd broken his gaze from where the fox had been last seen, he immediately shifted it over to the brambles, where I had hoped that Molepaw and Cherrypaw were still hiding. "I'm fine," he murmured, his voice husky. He then turned around and quickly approached the bush.

"Cherrypaw?" he called out, his voice rising with worry. He then paused once he had arrived at the brambles. "Cherrypaw? Molepaw? It's alright - the fox is gone."

For a moment, nothing stirred in the clearing. So, to say that when Cherrypaw and Molepaw emerged from the bushes was a relief, would be an *extreme* understatement.

Molepaw didn't fully leave his spot, and simply poked his head out from the bush, his eyes wide as he stared back at Swiftflight. "Are you sure?"

Swiftflight briefly glanced back at where the fox had disappeared. He almost seemed to take a moment to reassure himself before turning around to reassure Molepaw. "Yes, I'm sure. It's all clear," he meowed definitively before padding up closer to Cherrypaw, his eyes full of concern. "Are you okay?"

Molepaw followed the warrior's gaze, his eyes narrowed as they suddenly glowed with humor. "Who is?" he questioned, seemingly trying to hold in laughter.

I found that I was trying to hold in laughter myself as Swiftflight whipped his head around to shoot Molepaw a bewildered, angry glance. "Well, both of you, obviously," he insisted. Yet, he gaze fell right back on Cherrypaw despite his words. "Are you okay?"

Cherrypaw let out a sigh and shook out her fur. "Yes, we're okay," she meowed, giving my son a soft, reassuring look. Her eyes then widened after a moment. "What happened? How did you get the fox away?"

I trotted up to join the three younger cats. "Swiftflight scared it off, and hopefully did so for good," I explained concisely. I then looked

back and forth from Cherrypaw to Molepaw worriedly, and simultaneously tried to observe their pelts. "Did it hurt either of you?"

Cherrypaw immediately shook her head. "We're fine!" she insisted once again, then letting her gaze fall on my son once again, and her eyes beginning to glimmer. "Thanks to Swiftflight."

"*Swiftflight* was the one that saved us?"

Cherrypaw, Swiftflight and I immediately whipped our heads to look confusedly at Molepaw, who had so boldly spoken.

"Yes..." I murmured, wondering what reason Molepaw could possibly have to question that. "I watched him do it."

I actually found that I was beginning to grow irritated as I noticed that Molepaw didn't look convinced at all. "Well, then who was that cat who just stood off in the distance? I could see him through the brambles."

What? I thought, alarmed. *What cat?* Before I could even question the tom about his very off-putting words, Cherrypaw let out a gasp.

"You saw the cat too?" she exclaimed. "I'd wondered if I'd been seeing things..."

What in the name of StarClan?

Swiftflight and I exchanged a very concerned, confused glance with each other. I would have expected Swiftflight to feel hurt at the prospect of a cat questioning his heroic deed, but at the moment it seemed to be overpowered by his unease at what Molepaw and Cherrypaw were saying. "What ThunderClan warrior would just watch a fox advance on their Clanmate?" my son commented after a few long heartbeats.

"Possibly... not a ThunderClan warrior?" I concluded. *Swiftflight is right - I can be definitely sure that none of our own Clanmates would do such a thing!*

"Well, then we have to find out who it is!" Swiftflight demanded, his

voice rising almost to the point of a growl. "Who would be fox-hearted enough to do something like that?"

I raised my tail to stop Swiftflight from nearly running off into the forest. "Someone that, unfortunately, will need to be searched for later," I muttered sharply to my son, then whipping myself around and heading in the opposite direction - towards camp. "Right now, we need to get back to camp and make sure that you all are okay, and tell Rosepetal that she doesn't need to send out backup." I then paused for a moment, gesturing to Swiftflight and the two apprentices with my tail. "Come on. We need to go."

I then proceeded to lead the way towards ThunderClan camp, keeping the pace fairly quick, but making sure to be cautious of Swiftflight, who was clearly exhausted and wounded, but was trying his best to hide it.

He actually managed to quicken his pace to walk beside me, and although he was right there, it certainly didn't feel that way, as his focus was on something else. It seemed as if every heartbeat my son would take a glance behind us, his eyes widening with worry every time they landed on Cherrypaw. He'd then let out a small sigh and shake his head quickly before forcing his gaze forward.

Just earlier in the day, these gestures from my son maybe would have surprised me, but *that* had certainly changed.

Oh, *yes*.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement as I reflected on Swiftflight's behavior when he had heard Cherrypaw's yowl from the brambles. In the moment, I hadn't thought anything of it through my fear and the adrenaline rushing through me.

But now, as I thought about that moment combined with his gentle behavior towards her in training, him volunteering to help train her, and then seeing his protectiveness ruthlessly kick in when he realized that Cherrypaw was in danger...

I honestly couldn't help but wonder...

Not only is Swiftflight showing how great of a Clanmate he can be now - helping in training, heck - overseeing training in the first place, and then protecting cats in need... I thought to myself, taking one last glance at Swiftflight that he probably didn't notice. *But is he also maybe gaining a bit of a soft side?*

Chapter 9

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

Even though it had now been several moments since I had been in one-on-one combat with the horrible vixen, my heart was still beating as if I still was in the middle of the action.

Nothing would beat the feeling that had run through my body when I pinned Ashfur to the ground and yowled in his face that I never wanted to see his sorry pelt again, but this was definitely a close second. This was the most exhilarated I had felt since then.

If I had the ability to go back in time and tell myself as a kit that I was going to do what I had just done - leaped into a fight with a *fox*, not even with a twinge of reluctance or hesitation - I wouldn't have believed myself. I would have surely been killed if Goldenshine and her patrol hadn't been there to save me...

This latest experience had almost given me a sense of closure. Facing off with a fox didn't have to be something that was scary or traumatizing anymore, and now I knew that.

And if that wasn't enough, my own personal redemption had also come with a reputation of saving my Clanmates (hopefully). That was something that I would have done for only selfish reasons even just *days* ago, if I would have even done it at all.

But this had been a no-brainer. Cherrypaw's yowl was enough to cause me to bolt across the forest. *She surely would have been killed if I hadn't jumped in when I did*, I thought fearfully, not even being able to stand the thought of the fox getting anywhere near the ginger she-cat. *Great StarClan, if it had laid even* one *claw on her-*

I then cut off my own thoughts as I shook my head and let out a hiss. *And Molepaw too*, I told myself impatiently. *You keep forgetting that there were* two *cats in danger here, Swiftflight!*

I had already confirmed with myself several times that the two apprentices had gotten out of this squabble injury-free, yet I had already lost count of how many times I had glanced back at them since we had begun our travel back to camp after the attack.

I had barely been able to help it, but my eyes would always fall firstly to Cherrypaw. And as my gaze fell on her yet another time as we made our way back to ThunderClan, I suddenly found myself slowing my pace so that Goldenshine was taking the lead.

Eventually, I was walking side by side with Cherrypaw, with Molepaw on her other side. "Um... are you sure you're alright? You're not hurt?" I pressed to the ginger she-cat as my gaze met hers. I then blinked, shocked by the eagerness and desperation in my own voice.

I then cleared my throat, embarrassed, and then shifted my gaze to the ground. "Because... I mean, the more injuries that there are to deal with, the crankier Jayfeather will be, I'm sure."

Cherrypaw let out a quiet purr of amusement as she looked down at me. "Yes, Swiftflight. I'm alright!" she reassured me. And after I let out an internal sigh of relief, Cherrypaw went on. "You got to us before it could lay a claw on either of our pelts... even though I'd definitely give it a scratch to remember if you hadn't!" She then lifted a single unsheathed paw up in the air as her eyes gleamed with humor and determination.

I then couldn't help but purr with amusement, and I looked back up at the apprentice to see that her big amber eyes were now glowing with concern. "What about you?" she asked worriedly as she then began to scan over my pelt. "Are you okay? Did it hurt you?"

I immediately shook my head quickly and covered my own scratches with my tail. My own injuries were honestly the last thing on my mind. "Great StarClan, nevermind that. I'm pretty sure I have a couple of scratches," I reassured Cherrypaw. "And I would have gladly received more if that meant I was getting that fox away from you." I then broke Cherrypaw's gaze and cleared my throat again. "You *two*, I mean."

I nervously looked back at her to see that she was shyly looking back at me, purring with amusement once again. "I know that you would," she whispered, her eyes gleaming. "You were really, really brave."

I then stared back at the she-cat, my heart pounding as I tried to seek any words to say next. But before I could even do so, Cherrypaw simply flashed me another shy look before padding ahead to walk next to Goldenshine, who was about to crawl through the gorse tunnel.

I looked after Cherrypaw for a few moments before hesitantly turning to Molepaw. "What about you?" I prompted to the cream and gray tom. "Are you okay?"

Molepaw turned to me and gave me an eager nod. "Yes, I'm great! It was amazing!" he meowed excitedly before giving me a small nudge with his shoulder and snorting. "Would you like to ask that question to my sister again?"

I stared back at Molepaw, completely confused. "What?"

Before Molepaw had the chance to explain his cryptic words, any words he could have said were interrupted by the alarmed and triumphant yowls of ThunderClan cats as we entered into camp.

The first voice that I could clearly hear among the clatter was the one of my former mentor, Foxleap. "They're back!" he exclaimed, and just a heartbeat later, I could see his dark ginger pelt pad quickly up to meet us.

Rosepetal followed behind him, many other cats doing the same. "Thank StarClan!" she breathed. "Foxleap, Brightheart, Sandstorm and I were just about to run back out there to look for you!"

Jayfeather then shouldered his way through the crowd that was forming. "Where are the apprentices?"

Cherrypaw, who had trailed back to walk beside her brother again, emerged from behind Goldenshine and I. "Here!" she replied to the medicine cat. "Molepaw and I are fine!"

"Yeah, the fox nearly ate us up," Molepaw meowed, padding with her sister up to Jayfeather. "But Swiftflight came and chased it off! Some other cat was there too, but they didn't do a thing!"

I immediately cringed and exchanged a nervous glance with Goldenshine at Molepaw's words. I'd planned on taking the information of the mystery cat that Cherrypaw and Molepaw had apparently seen straight to Firestar... but I guess the whole Clan was hearing it first.

But just as the ThunderClan leader had crossed my mind, he seemed to be urgently making his way up to Cherrypaw and Molepaw. "What cat?" he instantly pressed. "Do you mean Goldenshine?"

"No," Cherrypaw answered, shaking her head. "Goldenshine, Rosepetal and Swiftflight chased off the fox, but it returned, and Swiftflight followed it back and scared it off! But-"

"But someone else was there too!" Molepaw exclaimed, cutting off his sister out of excitement. "They just stood and watched from far away while the fox came towards us!"

Firestar still looked incredibly skeptical as he stared up at the top of the stone hollow. "I didn't see any other cat up there..."

"It sounds unlikely to me," Brackenfur then commented.

"Yes," Berrynose, Cherrypaw's and Molepaw's father agreed, his meow taut and impatient. "Look, you two, it's not funny to make up stories about something so dangerous."

Sandstorm padded up to stand next to the cream tom. "You had a big scare, but there's no need to invent mysterious cats that make it all seem even scarier," she pale ginger she-cat meowed. "Goldenshine, Rosepetal and Swiftflight did a great job of scaring the fox away."

I couldn't help but feel a small pang of sympathy as I watched so many cats insist on refuting something that Cherrypaw and Molepaw seemed so sure about. And seeing Cherrypaw's dismayed gaze made it even worse. "But we're not making this up!" she

insisted.

"Right," Molepaw meowed as he gave a sharp nod. "There was another cat."

Firestar seemed to be growing more confused and more stressed with every word that Cherrypaw or Molepaw said. His eyes practically looked exhausted from worry as he turned to face Goldenshine and me. "Did either of you see who this cat was?"

While Goldenshine simply gave a shrug with wide eyes, I replied to the leader. "I didn't even realize that someone else had been there until Cherrypaw and Molepaw had said so." *I was too busy scaring off that horrible, bloodthirsty creature to notice!*

"I see..." Firestar murmured before giving a nod and looking back to the apprentices. "What was this cat like?"

"We never saw it clearly," Molepaw answered. "We were hiding in the bramble thicket. And we couldn't smell it above the scent of fox."

"We're not even sure it was a ThunderClan warrior," Cherrypaw added on.

I snorted at that comment. *And I sure hope that it wasn't!*

Several heartbeats after Cherrypaw's words, Firestar closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Very, very strange. I suppose that patrols will need to keep an eye out..." he murmured almost to himself. He then took a deep breath, hardened his gaze just a bit, and lifted his head. "The only thing that matter is that every cat is safe."

I then felt Goldenshine place the tip of her tail on my shoulder. "It's thanks to Swiftflight that that's the case!"

I flashed my mother a startled, shocked look as the gathered cats began to gasp and murmur with intrigue. Cherrypaw had mentioned earlier that I'd been the one to chase off the fox, but many cats hadn't been in earshot yet.

"So Swiftflight was the one to scare it off for good, huh?" Rosepetal

meowed once the voices had died down a bit. "I will say, he did burst through that forest after that fox like his life depended on it!"

Beside her, Foxleap let out a satisfied grunt as a very smug, happy expression emerged on his face. "Well, I can only expect that much from my former apprentice!" he purred as he looked proudly back at me. I gave him a small nod in return - it was all I could do at the moment while I was being overwhelmed with attention, something I wasn't that used to.

"And he was the one who snuck out of camp as a kit and had a run-in with a fox, wasn't he?" Icecloud then commented, her eyes wide and bright with admiration. "Great StarClan, look at him now!"

Although I was a bit stressed, the attention being a bit overbearing, I was simultaneously incredibly happy to witness so many cats murmuring and meowing their admiration and approval at what I had done. I bashfully dipped my head and shrugged in response to it all. Once I lifted my head back up, I found that I'd met the bright green gaze of Firestar.

He gave me a nod as my eyes locked with his. "ThunderClan honors your courage, Swiftflight," he meowed clearly. I was then surprised to see him pad up to me and speak in a lower voice. "Well done. Very well done." He then stepped back, revealing green eyes full of approval.

It was this very moment that made me fully realize that this thing I had done must have actually been... shocking to some cats. As I looked around the crowd once again, I was able to observe that some of my Clanmates almost looked more surprised than impressed. But honestly, I could understand. I almost *had* to, considering how I'd been presenting myself for the past six moons. *Me doing something that isn't in my own best interest probably wasn't expected, unfortunately...*

I then tried to shake away these tougher thoughts as Jayfeather padded up to where me, Cherrypaw, Goldenshine, and Molepaw were still standing. "Alright, alright, we can praise the fearless hero later," the medicine cat scoffed as he beckoned us with his tail. "Right now, I must see to him, his mother, and his rescuees. Come

on."

Cherrypaw and I then exchanged an amused glance as we followed Jayfeather towards the medicine den. Goldenshine trailed just behind the gray tabby tom and was staring ahead at him with her gray eyes narrowed and thoughtful. It was very strange to me that they weren't having any sort of lighthearted bicker like they always did. I really wanted to know what had changed, but it honestly wasn't much of my business.

I took a step to the side as I let Cherrypaw and Molepaw enter the medicine den first, and I followed just behind them. The four of us settled down in some pre-set moss as Jayfeather quickly padded to the back of the den to gather his herbs.

Briarlight passed by the medicine cat as she made her way towards us. I felt a small pang of worry as the brown she-cat let out an alarmed gasp when her eyes fell on Goldenshine. "Goldenshine! Great StarClan, your paws are full of bramble thorns!" the she-cat exclaimed worriedly before beginning to drag herself to another area of the den. "Come over here - I'll pull those out for you."

Goldenshine gave a couple of quick nods and stood up. "Oh, please do!" She then began to pad over to the she-cat, but paused as her fur brushed against mine. I looked back at her to meet a surprisingly stern-looking gaze. "You and Jayfeather are both very stubborn cats - let him be the only one to take on that role right now."

I flicked my ears. "What are you saying?"

Goldenshine raised a single eyebrow and tilted her head to the side. "Oh, I just know that you've had tendencies in the past to... well, *completely* deny the fact that you are hurt and need treatment right away." She then muttered into my ear, "Let him do what he needs to do."

I sighed, rolled my eyes, and then gave my mother a quick lick on the cheek. "Fine, fine," I murmured as I watched her finally make her way towards Briarlight. I then looked to my other side to see that Jayfeather was approaching me from where he'd been checking

over the apprentices.

I was shocked to see that the medicine cat wasn't giving me the usual hard stare that he always would whenever I was in his... *sight*, you could say. His current gaze wasn't exactly warm, but it didn't make me want to shrivel up and hide, anymore.

"Hi, Jayfeather," I greeted to the tom as he began to check me over.

The tom simply gave me a grunt of acknowledgement in return. "Hm, just a couple of minor scratches," he then murmured after a moment. "The bleeding has already stopped, so I'll just spread some marigold over them to make sure that they don't become infected."

Jayfeather then lifted his head up to meet my gaze. This time, his eyes were giving me the sort of look that made me want to shrivel up. "So," he muttered a bit more quietly. "You really chased off that fox?"

I simply gave the medicine cat the truth. "Yes, I did," I replied with a single nod.

I wondered if I'd actually seen a quick moment of pride cross through Jayfeather's blind eyes before he let out another grunt and returned to the back of the den where the herbs were.

I figured that he was going to grab the marigold that I needed, so I sat down on the moss and turned to look at where Cherrypaw and Molepaw were also waiting. "Did Jayfeather see anything wrong?" I asked worriedly, my gaze falling on Cherrypaw. I let out a quiet, frustrated hiss and began to flit my eyes back and forth between the two of them. "With either of you?"

Cherrypaw let out a soft purr of laughter, and I felt my ears grow hot. "Nope! He's going to check us over one more time, then he said we should be fine to go!" she replied, her gaze then shifting to the medicine den entrance. "Hi, Snowstorm!"

I followed Cherrypaw's gaze to see that sure enough, the white pelt of my best friend was making her way in. "Hi, Cherrypaw! And Molepaw," she greeted the apprentices as she crawled through the

bramble screen. "Are you two okay?"

"We're great!" Molepaw exclaimed, then snorting and jerking his head towards me. "There's no need to check - Swiftflight's done that enough!"

Snowstorm's blue eyes then sharply shifted to look at me. "I see..." she muttered as she padded up to my nest. "So, how are *you*, you fox-fighting hero?"

"Just fine," I replied to her as she gave me a small flick on the ear. "Jayfeather's getting some herbs to keep my scratches from infection, but that's it."

Snowstorm's eyes seemed to light up a bit at my words. "Marigold, right?" she asked, her head tilting to the side.

Hm... I thought as my eyes narrowed. "Yes..."

Snowstorm began to nod. "Good," she breathed. "That's good."

I then watched, concerned and confused, as Snowstorm begun to urgently whip her head around the den. Her eyes seemed to fall on Briarlight and Goldenshine, Jayfeather, and then the apprentices before she proceeded to basically yank one of my legs with her tail to pull me to the side.

"Snowstorm, what are you doing?" I hissed irritably as I found my footing again. "I'd like it if Jayfeather found me in the same place he left me in!"

"And you will be there!" she insisted as she further prompted me with her tail. She then took one last check behind us before sitting down and giving me a half-eager, half-interrogational look. "Just... I must know why you were suddenly so determined to save a couple of apprentices."

I let out an annoyed scoff, as I was almost offended by the question. "Okay, first off - my Clanmates were in danger, so I had to help," I answered tautly. "Second off - I don't know why that was a question that had to be asked in secret."

"So, you were worried about some Clanmates in danger, huh?" she pressed.

"Yes, that's what I just said," I muttered impatiently.

Snowstorm cocked an eyebrow. "Are you sure that you weren't worried about a specific Clanmate?" For some reason, she almost seemed to be suppressing excitement with these words.

I then lashed my tail as I realized what Snowstorm was getting at. but despite it, I answered, "I know how to count - I'm pretty sure that there were two apprentices hiding in those bushes."

Snowstorm began to nod slowly as she smirked. "Sure, sure... but I'm just saying..." She then leaned in closer, her voice going down to a whisper. "Your eyes have barely left a certain ginger pelt since you all returned to camp."

I sighed and closed my eyes slowly. *Yep, yep, yep.*

When I didn't answer immediately, Snowstorm gave me a light nudge and flicked her eyes over to where the apprentices still sat. "You seemed pretty worried about Cherrypaw."

My heart then began to beat even faster as I actually turned and looked over at Cherrypaw. After just a heartbeat, I looked back at Snowstorm, my tail lashing back and forth nervously. "I can't worry about a Clanmate?" I muttered.

"Yes, you can..." she replied, narrowing her eyes down to the smallest slits. "But you usually aren't one to do that very visibly..."

I looked back at my friend, actually having no idea what to say. Usually, my first impulse at an accusation like that would be to deny it profusely, and to tell Snowstorm that she was making something out of nothing. But I couldn't bring myself to now. For some reason, it felt *wrong* to do that. Really wrong.

I then looked back at Cherrypaw one more time. And I found that for just a moment, the horrible discomfort of this situation that Snowstorm was putting me in left for just a moment.

I almost felt surprised by my own feelings that seemed to surge in my heart as I looked at the ginger she-cat. *Uh, oh...*

I felt that I had to admit defeat. I sheepishly looked back at Snowstorm and gave the smallest shrug.

And with that, Snowstorm let out an *annoyingly* loud gasp, and her blue eyes nearly seemed to pop out of her head. "I knew that I was onto something!" she nearly squealed. She then let out a *mrrow* of laughter as she whipped herself around and began to trot out of the medicine den. "I will *see* you *later*, Swiftflight! Get well soon!"

I stared off wide-eyed at the place that Snowstorm had disappeared, feeling frozen and completely flabbergasted. *What in the name of StarClan did I just do?* I thought. *What did I just admit to her?*

I then took a deep breath and shook my head quickly as I committed to getting my thoughts together. *I thought that I liked* Ivypool *for the longest time...* I reflected. *She was brave, determined, and such a great warrior. My heart began to beat faster every time that I saw her, and it seemed as if everything that she did absolutely blew me away. I... I looked up to her.*

I then flicked my eyes over to Cherrypaw once again. *But the way that Cherrypaw makes me feel is so different from the way that Ivypool made me feel. I have to suppress a purr every time that I see her, I grow excited whenever I know that I'm going to be with her... I get nervous whenever we're close... my heart practically skips a beat every time I look into her eyes... her amazing spirit... her adorable laugh... her-*

I then blinked several times, utterly bewildered by these weird... *weird* thoughts that were spiraling around in my head. *What in the name of StarClan is wrong with me?* I then thought. *Since when are you like this.. thinking like some dainty tom? I'm almost disgusted with myself!*

I then flicked my ears, sighed, and closed my eyes. But at the same time, as out-of-place as these... *emotional* thoughts felt, I still had no reason to deny what Snowstorm had accused me of.

And after the way I've acted today... I'd definitely suspect something

too... "She may not be wrong..." I murmured, speaking my thoughts out loud without realizing it.

At this point, I had barely noticed that Jayfeather had begun to apply the marigold to my wounds. So, I was completely startled when he spoke to me. "Who?" he asked as he spread the marigold on my flank. "If you're referring to Snowstorm, then yes, she is."

"You don't even know what we were talking about!" I meowed defensively at the medicine cat.

Jayfeather then stood up and stepped back. "I don't necessarily have to," the medicine cat murmured, his eyes certain. A chill nearly ran down my spine as I realized what the meaning by his words may have been. "Okay, that's all set," he then meowed more loudly. "Wait for that to dry for just a bit, and then you're free to go."

I then watched as Jayfeather padded up to treat the apprentices. As he came to settle beside them, my stomach twisted up, and the absolute *weirdest* feeling overcame me as my eyes fell on Cherrypaw yet again. I felt a weird sense of relief and happiness, possibly because I had come to accept something that I had maybe tried to deny for a while. It was one of the many things that I'd failed to acknowledge through how the Dark Forest had blinded me.

My gaze was still on the ginger she-cat when Poppyfrost, her mother, suddenly and frantically burst into the medicine den. "Cherrypaw! Molepaw! Are you okay?" she meowed, her voice cracking with fear. She then urgently whipped her head around to look at Jayfeather. "Are you treating them?"

The blind medicine cat rolled his eyes. "No, I'm thinking about how lovely it would be to sniff some wildflowers right now," he muttered, before raising his voice and snapping. "Yes, I'm treating them! Keep your fur on!"

Poppyfrost flashed the gray tabby tom an annoyed look before turning back to her kits. "What happened?"

Molepaw stood up excitedly. "It was so cool!" the cream and gray tom exclaimed. "The fox appeared, and Goldenshine told us to hide

in the brambles."

"And we sat there, terrified as we listened to Rosepetal, Goldenshine and Swiftflight chase it off," Cherrypaw added in.

"It was quiet for a while, so we had assumed that it was gone..." Molepaw went on. "But then we heard its horrible growling again. We thought we were doomed!"

My eyes then grew wide as Cherrypaw stood up as well, and lashed her tail towards me. "But then Swiftflight saved us!"

Poppyfrost followed Cherrypaw's tail for just a moment, and her eyes narrowed down into slits. "Swiftflight..."

"Yes!" Cherrypaw meowed cheerfully. "He was so fearless... He chased that lump of fur off like it was nothing!"

Although my ears grew hot with Cherrypaw's praise, the flattery didn't last long, as I quickly grew uneasy as I observed the dark look that was crossing on Poppyfrost's face. "I see..." she then muttered.

A chill then ran down my spine as Poppyfrost gave me a hard stare. Now, these were something that I was quite used to... yet the tortoiseshell's expression that seemed to be a mix of anger, suspicion, and skepticism intimidated me to say the *least*.

I even almost felt tempted to take a pawstep back, but I stood my ground as Cherrypaw and Molepaw continued to retell the fox story to their mother.

Chapter 10

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I watched, my tail up high and my heart welling up with pride as Cherrypaw, Molepaw, Goldenshine and Swiftflight made their way towards the medicine cat.

The fox attack had only happened *moments* ago, but I could already tell that this was something that my Clanmates would be buzzing about for days to come. Just the fact that a fox had nearly gotten its paws on the apprentices was mind-blowing enough, but the fact that Swiftflight had been the one to save them had made the situation even more memorable.

I had exchanged a proud, happy glance with Thornclaw from where I was sitting next to Squirrelflight by the warriors den. Looking into his pale blue eyes, I was able to tell that we were thinking the same thing after it had been made known that Swiftflight was the hero. We both knew that our daughter's son was trying his hardest to change after what the fox-hearted Ashfur had put him through in the Dark Forest, but I didn't imagine that he'd receive a chance to prove himself so quickly.

And along with that, as Firestar had mentioned - every cat had come out of it completely safe.

At least, that was the last that I've heard...

I quickly stood up as I tried to push down panic. "I'll be right back," I meowed to Squirrelflight, flicking my eyes towards the medicine den. "I want to make sure that Goldenshine and Swiftflight are okay." *They seemed fine - they can clearly walk, but still...*

Squirrelflight raised her tail up to stop me as soon as I had started walking. "I wouldn't right now. The last thing that Jayfeather will want is one more cat in there fussing over their kin," Squirrelflight

pointed out, a bit of laughter in her voice. She purred with amusement as her gaze followed Poppyfrost, who practically dove into the medicine den at that very moment. "And he's about to be brought to his last nerve, I'm sure."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I took a pawstep back. "True words," I agreed, sitting back down. "Okay, okay - I'll just bring them prey and some uplifting words in a little while."

Just a heartbeat after I'd spoken my last word, I lashed my tail and gave a nod in greeting as I noticed Brambleclaw and Firestar making their way to the very spot that Squirrelflight and I were sitting in.

Firestar's green eyes looked anxious, but his whiskers seemed to be twitching with amusement. "Well, Squirrelflight's pre-planned patrol will certainly be convenient right now, consider we might have an intruder on our territory."

I let out a small gasp and flicked my ears at Firestar's words. "Oh my goodness, that's right!" I exclaimed as I recalled the ominous words of Cherrypaw and Molepaw, claiming that a mysterious cat had only *watched* as they were nearly "eaten up" by a fox.

My fur then began to prickle with unease. "So... do we think that they're telling the truth?"

"We're going to give them the benefit of the doubt," Firestar replied, his gaze wary as he shrugged. "When it comes to a possible invasion, it's always best to play it safe."

I gave a sharp nod to the ThunderClan leader. "Very true!" I agreed. "It's especially concerning that this cat supposedly just watched while two cats were being advanced on by a fox." *I certainly hope that it's no Clanmate of mine!*

Brambleclaw almost exactly echoed my thoughts. "That's why I'm praying to StarClan that it's not any warrior around this lake," he muttered, his amber eyes dark.

Squirrelflight padded forward, brushing past her mate and then

heading directly towards the camp entrance. "I second that," she meowed, then flicking her tail to beckon us. She looked back at Firestar, Brambleclaw and me as we then began to follow her. "So, we're thinking that this is probably a rogue or loner?"

"It seems so," Brambleclaw answered as he crawled through the gorse tunnel. He then lashed his tail in the air just once. "But I can't decide what would be worse - a bystander warrior, or a bystander rogue."

I flashed Brambleclaw a nervous, wary look in response to his words, and then proceeded to lower my head to the ground to begin searching for any possible foreign scent. It only took me a moment to notice the fairly fresh fox-scent. Thank StarClan, it was pretty clear that this fox was gone, and had stayed gone.

I was so immersed in my search for the stench of the mystery cat, that I flinched and nearly let out a startled yelp at Squirrelflight's voice.

"Hey!" the dark ginger she-cat exclaimed. I looked up to see her a few fox-lengths ahead of me, her nose in the air. "I think I've caught something."

Firestar immediately trailed ahead to stand by his daughter. I nervously watched as he gaped his mouth open and gave his ears a single flick just a moment later. "I smell it too."

At this, I immediately lifted my head into the air and took the biggest whiff that I could. Sure enough, I could detect a scent that was familiar - a cat - but I certainly hadn't smelled it often. And by Brambleclaw's bristling fur beside me, I could tell that he'd also caught wind of it.

I exchanged an anxious look with the ThunderClan deputy before looking back at Squirrelflight and Firestar. "Us too," I replied to them. "And it's definitely not a Clan cat."

Firestar's eyes slowly narrowed down into slits. "Hm, so it appears that a stranger has been here..."

After a moment's silence at the seriousness of this situation, Brambleclaw broke the tension by padding ahead and giving a lash of his tail. "Well, acknowledging it alone won't get us anywhere," the dark tabby tom called back. "Let's keep going."

And with that, all four of us quickly began to travel deeper into the forest, following this new, mysterious scent with our muzzles in the air and our fur bristled out.

Eventually, we found ourselves getting closer and closer to what I knew to be WindClan's border. I was following a scent that seemed to go along the stream when I noticed Squirrelflight pause just behind me.

"Hm, it goes beyond our territory," she then murmured, "Into WindClan. I guess it's their problem now."

I immediately lifted my head back up as I grew confused. That wasn't at all what I what I had come to conclude. In fact - the scent I was following seemed as strong as ever where I was standing. "Are you sure?" I questioning, reflecting my confusion to my friend. "Why do I still smell something strange over here?" *Or maybe my nose just completely lost any frame of reference it had, and I sound crazy.*

Firestar padded up to where I was standing and gaped his mouth open, and I couldn't help but feel a bit of relief when I noticed that he seemed to detect something as well. "You're right, Lilypetal - this scent leads in a completely different direction," the leader meowed. "Could there possibly have been two different intruders?"

"Uh, oh," I breathed just before taking another sniff. "And it's fresh, too." I then flitted my eyes around to meet each gaze of the cats in our patrol. "Whoever this was, was *definitely* around at the time of the fox attack..."

All four of us together then exchanged a nervous glance before proceeding to see where this new scent would lead us. *What is happening?* I thought worriedly as Firestar and I took the lead, while Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight trailed back just behind us. *Two mysterious cats on our territory at once? This is fishier than the lake!*

And it managed to feel even more fishy as our patrol seemed to be pulled further and further away from ThunderClan territory. In fact, we were now fairly close to a place I very much recognized - the path that led to the greenleaf Twoleg nest that I had once presided in, to my dismay.

Here, the new scent I had discovered was strong, and was becoming stronger with each pawstep I took. Our patrol surely would have turned back at this moment if we weren't so close.

Squirrelflight's yowls were really making me jumpy today, apparently - because I flinched for the second time as I heard her let out a hiss. "Everyone!" she meowed, lowering her voice down to a loud whisper. "Look up ahead!"

My gaze followed in the direction that Squirrelflight had indicated with her tail, and I looked ahead to see a somewhat steep hill, covered with short, soft-looking grass. It only had a few patches of dirt, and it was shaded over by the many trees that surrounded it.

Right in the center of the scene, I could just barely see the clear silhouette of a cat, seemingly wandering the area aimlessly with its tail up in the air.

Squirrelflight whipped herself around to reveal her green eyes blaring with excitement. "We need to chase after it!"

"But it's not even on our territory anymore!" Brambleclaw insisted, alarmed by his mate's enthusiasm. "We'd only be causing trouble."

Squirrelflight rolled her eyes and took a step closer to Brambleclaw. "But it *was* on our territory, wasn't it?" Squirrelflight replied. "And this might be the cat that *watched* Cherrypaw and Molepaw be attacked by a fox!"

Firestar gave a small nod from where he now stood next to Brambleclaw. "I have to agree. If this is the cat we're looking for, we must find out what their intentions were."

Squirrelflight looked smugly back at Brambleclaw. "See? Exactly!" she exclaimed before shifting her eager gaze over to me and flicking

her tail. "Come on, Lilypetal - let's get this cat together!"

Agreeing with Squirrelflight's and Firestar's thoughts, I excitedly nodded back at Squirrelflight. "I'm with you!" I exclaimed. "Although, we can't exactly 'get' it if we're wanting to talk with it!" *But it is technically an intruder... we should give it a little scare and not let it get off so easily!*

I then padded up to Squirrelflight, not being able to help feeling exhilarated by the thought of confronting an intruder. "Here - we'll approach it at the same time, and if it begins to flee, I'll run ahead and trap it while you stay just behind them."

Squirrelflight gave a single sharp nod and touched my shoulder with her tail tip. "Got it," she muttered, lowering her voice again. "Now, let's go, before it catches our scent."

I turned back to Firestar and Brambleclaw before beginning to follow Squirrelflight, who had immediately trotted ahead. "We'll be right back!" I whispered to the two toms before crouching down and following behind.

The two of us then began to slowly but surely slither ahead, making sure that the mystery cat couldn't hear or see us approaching as we continued to follow it through the forest.

Soon enough, we were just a few tail-lengths away from the stranger, hiding in some bushes that hopefully weren't revealing us at all.

"Alright, Lilypetal - you give the signal," Squirrelflight muttered.

Oh, I get to give the signal! I acknowledged the she-cat with a flick of my tail before proceeding to carefully peer over the bushes. Luckily, the cat seemed to be paused where he was. Unfortunately, as close as it was to us, its appearance was completely unidentifiable through the darkness of the shade.

But that didn't matter. All that *did* was the fact that he was close, and his head was currently turned away from the two of us.

My heart was beginning to well up with determination and elation

as I slowly began to stand up and brace to leap forward. "And... *go!*"

Squirrelflight and I immediately burst ahead and leapt out into the open. As expected, the cat immediately noticed us and began to run.

This, of course, was a moment where I was incredibly thankful that we had a plan.

Squirrelflight began to trail back just a bit while I picked up speed in order to intercept our pursuee. I will admit, it was actually a little more difficult than I thought it was going to be - this cat was fast, and seemed to have fairly long legs.

But by the grace of StarClan, I still managed to run past them, leap forward and gently pin them down, still keeping my claws sheathed.

I most definitely should have felt an overwhelming amount of triumph at what I had just done, but I most definitely couldn't.

Not when I very well recognized the face staring up at me, their eyes a reflection of my own - the color that I had been notorious for since I was a kit.

My jaw felt as if it should have dropped on this cat's neck by how wide my mouth opened. "*Oreo?!*" I exclaimed in complete shock.

I was at a loss for words still by the time that Squirrelflight had caught up to us. "Wait, Oreo?" she repeated, clearing having heard my surprised yowl. "Isn't that your brother? The one that you brought into camp a few moons ago?"

I quickly backed off of Oreo. "Heck yes, he was!" I then began to well up with so much happiness as I watched the black and white tom get back up on his paws. "Oreo!" I cried excitedly, then running up to touch noses with him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Brambleclaw and Firestar were padding up just behind Squirrelflight, but they weren't the cats that I was focusing on at the moment. "What are you doing here?"

I stared apologetically back at Oreo as I watched him shake out his

fur. "Well, firstly - this was a place that I thought that I wouldn't be *attacked* in," my brother replied, his hazel eyes gleaming with humor. He then let out an amused snort. "I was wrong about that!"

"I'm sorry! We thought that you were an intruder," I replied, brushing a leaf off of Oreo's shoulder with my tail. *And unfortunately, you might still be...* "Did I hurt you?"

"Well, the pin-down was a bit forceful, but I'll live," Oreo teased as he flicked my ear with his tail. I was then surprised to see a bit of guilt in his eyes. "And actually, I hate to admit that I... *was* intruding."

My stomach twisted up into a knot, and I felt my fur began to prickle nervously. *Surely it's not true...* "Y-you were?" I asked Oreo nervously. *Please, please don't be this heartless stranger that we've been searching for!*

"Yes. I was actually trying to find you, but I couldn't for the *life* of me remember how to get to your camp," Oreo explained. "So, I went into a bit into what I thought was ThunderClan territory, but I felt about as lost as I could be, so I decided that I would have to maybe catch you on patrol at a later time."

My heart continued to pound hard in my chest, because none of that necessarily confirmed, or didn't confirm our suspicions yet. *Please, please, please. I already have a father that thrives off of witnessing death - don't give me a brother too!*

Firestar stepped up to stand in front of Oreo as I continued to try and stay calm. "You said that you thought you were on ThunderClan's territory," Firestar questioned, his eyes narrowed. "Were you actually ever near our camp, from what you could tell?"

I felt relief as if a badger had been lifted from back as I saw Oreo shake his head. "There were a lot of things I wasn't sure about in my travels, but if one thing was for sure, it was that I was nowhere near to finding your camp!" he meowed, his voice full of laughter. "I haven't been traveling for very long, anyway."

With those words, Squirrelflight, Firestar, Brambleclaw and I

exchanged a half-anxious, half-certain glance as we concluded that Oreo wasn't the mystery cat, fortunately. Unfortunately though, that meant that the scent we had lost going into WindClan territory was probably the one that we needed to find.

I obviously was disappointed by this. Even though the real mystery cat wasn't in our territory anymore, it would still be nice to know who was horrible enough to not interfere in the middle of a fox attack. *And I was so determined to find out who it was that I actually worried that it might have been Oreo, for StarClan's sake!*

My disappointment didn't last very long, considering my brother was still standing right in front of me, the brother that I felt so incredibly close to even though we had only just found out about each other moons ago. "Well, I'm sorry that you got so lost!" I purred to Oreo. "Why were you looking for me here?" I then let out an amused snort. "Well, besides the reason of - you're my brother and wanting to see a sibling is kind of a given..." *Some other cats in our Clan wouldn't have shown you much mercy if they'd found you instead.*

I then tilted my head and flicked my ears as a new thought crossed my mind, one that confused me immensely. "Wait... weren't you supposed to return home with your housefolk a bit ago?" *They were supposed to return to their home far away come greenleaf, I recall!*

"Well, I was actually coming to explain why I didn't leave with them..." Oreo replied, his eyes warm and filled with excitement for a reason that I didn't know yet. "I left my housefolk, and I'm planning on finding another home in the Twolegplace nearby."

Wait... what?! I was immediately overwhelmed with a mix of bewilderment and happiness at this news. I happened to look back at Firestar, who's green eyes also reflected surprise. "Really?" I then exclaimed. "Why did you do that?"

Oreo shrugged and sat down. "Well, as you would expect... there's a lot of things I've discovered about myself recently," he began, his gaze growing solemn. "I have family that's only a few pawsteps away. I've always had friends, but never any blood kin that I knew of that I was close to."

My brother then paused for a moment, and then gave a single nod before continuing. "But now that I do, I don't want to leave them. You live in a Clan nearby, and..." Oreo's gaze managed to grow even darker. "And Mistpelt's spirit is here. It will always be here."

I suddenly found myself having to force down an almost unbearable amount of grief. I screwed my eyes shut as an attempt to trap my emotions inside. "Yeah..." I murmured, my voice cracking slightly. *Great StarClan, it still hurts as if it's a fresh wound.* "Yeah, it will."

I then took a deep breath, and my sadness seemed to slowly and gently fade away as I tried to focus on my brother's news. "Oreo, that's amazing. I'm so happy to hear that!" I replied more cheerfully. I then took a step closer to the black and white tom, flashing him a teasing, hinting sort-of look. "But..."

Oreo seemed to immediately guess what I was getting at, and reflected the same look I was giving him. "But...?"

"But wouldn't you rather join ThunderClan?" I pressed, cutting right to the chase. I then flashed the three cats behind me an uncertain, apologetic glance, as it was likely they wouldn't like this suggestion. *But... I have to ask my brother if I'm getting the opportunity... even if he's rejected it before.*

I then turned back to Oreo. "If you did that, you'd be even closer to your kin," I reasoned to him. "And I'm sure you'd love living in a Clan - getting to hunt for your own food, defending your territory with your Clanmates, sleeping under the stars... oh, Oreo, nothing could even begin to describe how much I love it." I then paused, shook my heart quickly and let out a purr. "I mean - how much *you would* love it."

As I had expected, Oreo hesitated greatly. But even though it *was* expected, I still felt disappointed as I watched my brother shake his head. "As true as that could be... I just can't do that," he replied, his hazel eyes apologetic. "A... *Clan* cat is not who I am, and I don't want to make it who I am."

"But you could try!" I meowed encouragingly. "That's exactly what I did!"

Oreo shook his head yet again, but his eyes were bright. "Nonsense, Lilypetal. You never had to make yourself into anything," he replied, peering behind me briefly to look back at the rest of the patrol. "A Clan cat is what you were meant to be. I can see that."

The tom then looked back at me as he gave an amused snort. "Me, however... well, this is the compromise for myself that I'm going to have to go with."

I sighed, finally giving in. "I completely understand, Oreo," I meowed warmly. I then felt my heart sink just a bit as our two hazel gazes locked. "But I *hate* to see you leave again." *I really, really hate it!*

"Hey, I'll be close!" Oreo reminded me as he briefly touched his nose to my ear. "Closer than I was originally going to be!"

"Thank StarClan," I breathed, actually feeling better at that thought. "How do you even plan to find new housefolk?"

Oreo snorted. "Oh, that'll be easy," he meowed smugly as he gave a wink. "All I have to do is stand at one of their doors, meow at an obnoxious volume, wait for them to open the door, and then I give them a pitiful look, and they won't be able to resist!"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter and shook my head slowly. "Goodness, the things that kittypets do for Twolegs... blows my mind," I murmured half to myself before touching noses with Oreo. "Well, I wish you the best of luck... at doing something extremely humiliating."

Oreo purred as he pulled away. "Thanks... I think?"

After the two of us shared a laugh, I then took a glance back at the patrol as I realized that our conversation had surely taken up enough time already, now that we had figured out that Oreo wasn't the cat that we were looking for. "Sure!" I purred before slowly and reluctantly beginning to walk back. "I'm so, so glad that you're staying." *More than I could ever tell you!*

"Me too," Oreo replied as he looked warmly back at me. "Which

means that I'd better see you soon!"

I gave my brother one single, definitive nod. "Count on it," I purred, then watching as my brother finally turned around and finally began to pad away.

But almost immediately feeling a sad tug, I turned around slightly and called back to him, "Hey!"

Once Oreo paused and turned back around, I took a step forward. "Maybe I'll bring my kits to meet you soon at your new home!" I called back to him.

My brother's eyes immediately lit up. "I've been anxious to meet those three furballs!" I purred. "Don't let me down."

I then forced myself to turn around completely after giving Oreo one last nod of farewell, as difficult as it was. I let out a sad sigh as I faced the patrol again. *I'm so, so happy that Oreo is going to be close by... but how amazing would it have been for him to be next to me right now, returning to camp with us?*

As I then padded up to the patrol, I felt instantly comforted as both Brambleclaw and Firestar touched the tip of their tails to my shoulder, and Squirrelflight gave me an affectionate flick on the ear.

Then, as we began to travel back to camp, Brambleclaw flashed me a sympathetic look and padded up to walk beside me. "It's difficult having kin that lives far away, I know that for sure."

As I was giving the dark tabby tom an appreciative look, Firestar then padded to my other side. "It is tough," the ginger tom meowed as he exchanged a glance with his deputy. "Brambleclaw and I both know that struggle *very* well."

Oh my gosh, that's right! I realized as I thought about Firestar's words. *Each of them has a sibling that doesn't actually live with them.* "My goodness, how do you all stand it?" I couldn't help but ask the two toms. I turned to look at Brambleclaw. "Don't you ever want to pay Tawnypelt a visit in ShadowClan?" I then looked to Firestar. "Or run all the way back to your old territory just to see Princess?"

As Brambleclaw gave a nod, Firestar answered me. "Of course. All of the time," the ThunderClan leader admitted before putting the tip of his tail back on my shoulder. "But I always have to keep this in mind whenever I feel that tug - the distance between us doesn't define a distance in our relationship. You're only separated by that physical distance, but never at heart."

Firestar's words couldn't have been more true, and they actually wiped away my grief just a bit. "You're absolutely right," I purred before flicking my gaze from Firestar to Brambleclaw back and forth. "Thank you, both."

"As much as I would love for these sentiments to continue..." Squirrelflight, who was a couple of tail-lengths ahead, called back to us. "There's a new fresh scent on our territory - the original one that we were following earlier."

Firestar's eyes flashed with alarm beside me. "What?" he nearly yowled before checking to see if his daughter was correct. "You're right," he meowed after a moment, his gaze darkening. "It's completely fresh."

Oh, no.

"And it's leading deeper into our territory," Brambleclaw added on, then running ahead to flank his mate. "Let's go!"

The four of us then nervously and urgently began to follow the very fresh scent - so fresh that it felt as if we were practically following the cat who had left it. And the tension we were all surely feeling continued to grow as we all seemed to realize that this scent was leading us straight back towards camp.

I was terribly scared of what we were going to find, and the sadness of Oreo leaving, and also the excitement of him living nearby had almost completely left my mind for the moment.

In fact, I could barely stand the anticipation and fear as I was feeling as we found ourselves making our way through the gorse tunnel, the scent still in front of us.

And then, the scent was as strong as it could be, and it was mingled by the many smells of my own Clanmates.

I could hardly believe who I saw among the cats gathered in the clearing. I immediately felt my fur begin to bristle and a growl begin to rise in my throat. I had never thought that I'd see this sickening, tall, calico figure again.

"Sol..." I muttered through gritted teeth as my claws slid out of their sheathes.

Chapter 11

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

My fur practically felt like it was on fire as I continued to stare back at the calico tom standing in the middle of camp. I was actually surprised by the amount of shock and rage that I felt, as it had been seasons since the Clans had ever been aware of his presence.

But I guess that was just how much of a horrible impact he had left on me. I had only just arrived into the Clans, but I still vividly remembered how much Sol had infuriated me - manipulating Blackstar into not believing in ShadowClan, for one, and also just seemingly wanting to cause trouble among the four Clans for absolutely no reason.

To my relief, all that this devious tom had done had clearly lingered with my Clanmates as well. It only took one glance around the camp clearing to see how uneasy many cats looked as soon as they laid eyes on Sol.

My eyes first rested on Dustpelt, who had seemed to pause in his travel towards the dirtplace. "I don't believe it!" the dark tabby tom growled, his eyes widening as he then began to pad towards Sol. "What are you doing here?"

"Sol!" I then heard Cloudtail exclaim from where he was curled up with Brightheart in the sun. "It can't be!"

With these exclamations, more and more cats began to flow into the camp clearing. Cats urgently emerged from their dens and many heads turned. I glanced to the side to barely catch Goldenshine, Swiftflight, Jayfeather, Molepaw and Cherrypaw walking out from the medicine den. Goldenshine abruptly stopped in her tracks as soon as her gray eyes fell on Sol, before they seemed to be overcome with unease and confusion.

"Sol!" I then heard Squirrelflight hiss beside me, and I felt her fur begin to bristle against my own. "Oh, no..."

I pressed comfortingly against my friend, then watched as Cherrypaw and Molepaw seemed to pad up to Sol like he was a Clanmate of theirs. Both of their eyes were wide with awe and intrigue.

"Are you really Sol?" Cherrypaw breathed. "Mousefur has told us about you!"

"Yeah, are you the cat who stole the sun?" Molepaw added in after his sister.

I then had to tell myself to remain calm, sinking my unsheathed claws into the ground as I heard Sol speak. "Yes," he meowed evenly, dipping his head to the apprentices. "But I gave it back again."

Oh, please!

"What do you want?" Graystripe meowed sharply to Sol as he padded up to join the crowd that was forming. "Every time you set a paw in our territory, it means trouble."

"Right," Dustpelt agreed, thankfully. "If I were you, Sol, I would turn around again and go back to where you came from."

My anger continuing to rise, I then couldn't help but intervene. Why Sol thought that he could come into our camp so nonchalantly after all that he had done, annoyed me more than I could have ever thought. "And if not that," I began, picking up off of Dustpelt's words, "At least turn around, walk out through that gorse tunnel, and get out of our territory, please." I then let out a quiet snort and muttered my next words. "Or maybe taking the dirtplace passage would be better suited."

I actually heard a few quiet purrs of amusement as Sol then turned towards me, and my fur began to rise even more as I met his yellow gaze. "So good to meet old friends," he replied, raising one of his paws and giving it a single lick. "There's always such a warm

welcome in ThunderClan."

I suppressed a humored sniff. *You must have been struck by lightning and shredded by another group of cats you've visited if you think that* this *is a warm welcome...*

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Firestar padding ahead of our patrol and approaching the calico tom. "Why are you here, Sol?" he asked sharply, clearing trying to keep his voice calm.

Just as he had the first time he arrived in ThunderClan, he answered as if he wasn't being pressed by several indignant cats at once. "I was just passing through. I couldn't go on without stopping to greet my friends in ThunderClan."

And I eat maggots for dinner. "Passing through?" I repeated, taking a step closer to Sol. "Are you sure that's all?"

I actually found myself somewhat intimidated as Sol suddenly broke his gaze from Firestar and quickly turned to face me, his yellow eyes seeming to flash with warning for a single heartbeat. At nearly the same moment, I felt fur brush beside me, and I realized that Thornclaw had quickly made his way up to stand next to me, clearly sensing the threat in Sol's gesture like I had.

I pressed closer to my mate as Sol spoke, his gaze burning into mine. "Is that all?" he repeated, his voice ominously light. "Now, Lilypetal, I have nothing that I need to accomplish here on this territory!"

Any fear I had maybe felt was replaced with bitterness once again. "Your scent on our territory says otherwise," I muttered in reply.

"Yes," I then heard Brambleclaw meow behind me, just before his dark tabby pelt came into view. He then paused just behind the ThunderClan leader. "Firestar, it appears that we have found our fox-attack witness."

An eruption of gasps and hisses towards Sol then rippled among the gathered cats. Cherrypaw and Molepaw, who were still standing fairly close to Sol, suddenly seemed quite scared. Swiftflight looked

almost completely enraged by the blazing look in his blue-gray eyes as he sank his claws into the ground, and my daughter was taking on a similar demeanor.

Despite all of this though, Sol simply continued to stand in his place, his face looking smug and... confused? I didn't like it, and I was already dreading hearing what he could possibly say in response.

His eyes then widened as he scanned them around the cats of ThunderClan. "Fox-attack *witness*, you say?"

"Yes!" Berrynose growled, understandably looking infuriated by what he had just found out. "You stood aside and didn't lift a paw while a fox nearly shred my kits apart!"

"Swiftflight had to scare that creature off all by himself!" Foxleap them added in before flashing his former apprentice an apologetic look. "Which he has the ability to do, no doubt, but what kind of sick cat doesn't even think to go and help?"

Many eyes then shifted to look at Sol once again, and fell nearly silent as he grew quiet. I then exchanged a troubled look with Thornclaw as Sol then slowly glanced over at Swiftflight.

The calico tom's eyes then narrowed into slits as he let them rest on the young dark gray tom. "Swiftflight, that's who."

What? How dare Sol say something like that? My mouth immediately dropped as gasps even louder than the first wave rose once again in the camp, and I looked around to see that many cats almost seemed alarmed by Sol's accusation. I then looked over to Swiftflight and instantly felt an overwhelming amount of sympathy as I saw how utterly bewildered he looked.

"What?" my kin exclaimed among the gasps and murmurs. "What are you talking about?"

Sol then met Swiftflight's gaze once again with wide eyes, then taking a step back and beginning to scan his eyes among the crowd. "Oh, how horrible it was!" Sol began, his voice filled with dismay. "I

had heard the fox's growls when I was lingering about the WindClan border, so I padded deeper into ThunderClan territory to see what was going on. I began to run once I heard the screeches of those poor apprentices."

Sol's gaze then returned to Swiftflight once again, his gaze dark. "I emerged into the clearing, and I could hardly believe my eyes," he continued, then lashing his tail to Swiftflight. "A ThunderClan warrior, just *standing* there as his own Clanmates were about to be killed! So, I had to leap in and do it myself."

The Clan then fell completely silent, this story clearly being one that would be hard to process. *But it's not true!* I insisted in my mind. I hadn't been there at the fox attack, but I was sure that what Sol was saying was a lie. For one, he was Sol - that on its own could be enough. But I also trusted Swiftflight, more than I ever had in the past, and I knew that he didn't deserve one bit of this.

Before I could speak this aloud, Berrynose spoke and broke the silence. "You were the one that saved Cherrypaw and Molepaw?"

"But why would Swiftflight say that he did?" Blossomfall then called out.

Because he did*, for StarClan's sake!* Goldenshine then immediately cut in before I made my attempt to speak up once again. "You all can't be serious! Swiftflight said that he attacked that fox, because he did!" she exclaimed. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of pride for the way that Goldenshine was standing up for her kit. Thornclaw and I each gave each other a small nudge as Goldenshine then padded up to Sol.

"Sol, this is a whole load of foxdung, and you know it!" she continued. "I watched him with my own eyes, and even if I hadn't, I would easily deduce that it would be you - a *liar*, not him, that would do something so fox-hearted!"

Sol simply stared back at Goldenshine, his gaze hard. "Are you so sure about that?" he pressed before looking back at Swiftflight, who currently looked like the definition for "at a loss for words". "His past wouldn't do the best job of backing that up."

I nearly wanted to leap on Sol and throw him out of camp by the scruff at this point because of the outrageous words he was throwing out there. But I slowly began to well up with fear as I noticed that some of the cats in front of me actually looked skeptical.

But Swiftflight didn't seem to notice, and was staring back at Sol as his lips began to curl back into a snarl. "How do you-"

"Sol, so you're saying that you were the one to save my kits?" Poppyfrost then exclaimed, shouldering her way through the crowd and cutting off whatever Swiftflight had been about to say. Her gaze was eager as she stopped and stood just in front of Sol. "They didn't get a good look at you, so they surely could have been confused!"

Swiftflight's gaze then seemed to be overwhelmed with shock and complete betrayal as he shifted his gaze to Poppyfrost.

Cherrypaw was staring back at Swiftflight, her amber eyes filled with empathy and dismay. She then whipped herself around to face her mother. "But that doesn't mean that Swiftflight wasn't the one to save us!" she demanded. "I can be sure that it was him."

Poppyfrost narrowed her eyes back at her daughter. "Based off of what?"

"Based off of the fact that my son is a noble ThunderClan warrior!" Goldenshine growled, her fur beginning to bristle.

I could almost feel the tension among the cats continuing to rise in the camp clearing. Which meant, to my dismay, that surely some cats were believing Sol's story, and agreed with Poppyfrost's words. *No, no, no...*

But luckily, some of the senior warriors who had actually known Sol seemed to think otherwise. "And anyway, what was Sol doing, wandering around ThunderClan territory in the first place?" Dustpelt called out.

"Yeah," Cloudtail agreed. "Why didn't he come straight here if he

wanted to visit, or make himself known to a patrol?"

Poppyfrost shot the white warrior a glare. "He probably wasn't sure about what sort of welcome he'd get," she hissed to Cloudtail before turning back to Sol, her eyes bright. "Sol, this is incredible!"

I then saw Cherrypaw's eyes flash with alarm. "Poppyfrost!"

Goldenshine exchanged a frustrated, bewildered glance with her apprentice as she padded up to stand next to her. "What makes you so certain of the fact that Sol was the one that saved your kits? You know, even though I saw Swiftflight do it," Goldenshine pressed through gritted teeth. "And Cherrypaw and Molepaw seemed pretty certain about it too, last time I checked."

"The only thing that Cherrypaw and Molepaw seemed certain of was the fact that Swiftflight was the one to take them out of the bushes, not save them," Poppyfrost insisted sharply. "And Goldenshine, as his mother, you'd surely defend him unconditionally - I'd want to do the same."

I stared, absolutely shocked by everything I was hearing. *Poppyfrost, what are you thinking by making this argument?*

Swiftflight then seemed to be pushed to his limit, taking a step forward and letting his voice rise. "She's defending me, because it's the truth!"

Foxleap then flashed Swiftflight a sympathetic glance before stepping up towards Sol. "Sol, my former apprentice may be a cranky furball at times, but he's not a malicious bystander."

"Exactly," Snowstorm then called out from where she was now standing next to her best friend. "Swiftflight would easily and willingly do this."

"I agree, most definitely!" Cherrypaw exclaimed.

"Well, of course, Swiftflight would..." Sol then murmured, his voice eerily quiet. "Well, would say anything to help his reputation."

I couldn't hold back a hiss of complete outrage. "You have got to be

kidding me!" I growled. I then took a quick glance around to see that many cats looked exactly as I felt. Thornclaw's fur was bristled out to almost double his own size, while Goldenshine, Foxleap, Ivypool, Snowstorm also looked incredibly infuriated. Cherrypaw looked utterly dismayed and continued to stare worriedly over at Swiftflight. She looked as if she wanted to run up to his side, but clearly there was an impediment for that being able to happen, at the moment.

But unfortunately, besides this small group that could barely stand to hear Sol's awful words, many cats in ThunderClan actually seemed conflicted and skeptical, and were flashing uncertain and apologetic glances at Swiftflight, who didn't seem to know what to say all over again.

I could barely stand to see the look on his face, so I turned back to Sol as I tried to keep my fur flat. "Sol," I began tautly. "I'd suggest that you stop blaming my kin for something that they most definitely didn't do, and leave right now." I didn't care if I wasn't any sort of authority figure, but Sol was clearly causing trouble among the Clan that wasn't needed, and I said what I'd thought was best.

"No, he can't leave now!" Poppyfrost insisted, practically ignoring every word I'd said, except for the piece where I'd told Sol to leave. "Oh, Sol, thank you so much! You'll always be welcome here."

I felt sick to my stomach as I saw Sol's eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "Thank you, Poppyfrost," Sol meowed warmly. "But really, it was nothing."

I then felt Thornclaw shift beside me. "I don't believe this!" he growled.

"I do - and fighting a fox isn't nothing," Berrynose insisted as he padded up to stand next to his mate. He then turned to Firestar. "He can stay the night, can't he?"

Oh my StarClan, I swear, if he... I then nervously glanced over to Firestar, hoping with all of my might that the leader would immediately send Sol away. But once I got a good look at his

conflicted gaze, I already began to brace myself for the anger and frustration I'd feel for his answer.

And sure enough, the time came when Firestar gave a small nod. "Very well."

My heart then sank as Berrynose trotted up to Sol and then beckoned him with his tail. "Come over here and take your pick of the fresh-kill pile."

I then watched, utterly vexed and exasperated as Berrynose and Poppyfrost escorted Sol over to the fresh-kill pile. And to my dismay, many more cats seemed to be giving in to the situation, murmuring their thanks to the calico cat as he padded past them.

Swiftflight still stood in the same place, looking completely defeated as he stared at the ground and shook his head slowly. I then flicked my ears as he suddenly stood up and began to storm off towards the camp entrance. Goldenshine, Snowstorm, Cherrypaw, and a few others stared after him, seemingly wanting to follow, but the dark gray tom was fast, and vanished through the gorse tunnel within a couple of heartbeats.

I was overwhelmed with so much sadness and sympathy for my daughter's son. My own head began to shake slowly as I completely processed this horrible situation, and it only took me a moment to realize just how much that I refused to accept this. *I'm going to try and do something while I have the ability to!*

I took a deep breath, stood up, and turned to Thornclaw, who was still right beside me. I touched my nose to his cheek to get his attention. "Hey, I'll be right back!"

Thornclaw immediately flashed me a worried, skeptical look. "Lilypetal, what are you doing?" he asked, a single eyebrow raising as he narrowed his eyes.

"I'm just going to talk to Firestar for a moment," I reassured my mate before beginning to pad away. "I didn't see the fox attack, but I don't care. Swiftflight wouldn't do what Sol is claiming he did." *I trust my own kin, and unless he's been duping us with all this*

information he's telling us... which I know is not the case!

I quickly made my way to Firestar, who was nervously watching Sol from under the Highledge. He seemed so caught up in his own thoughts, that he was startled when he noticed me approaching him.

I gave him an apologetic glance before speaking. "Firestar, may I please talk to you?" And after the leader simply gave me a nod, I went on. "Listen, I'm sorry if I'm only making your thoughts more scattered by saying this, but... I don't trust a word that Sol said - I wouldn't care if he was hanging onto a ledge for dear life saying that he was the one that saved Cherrypaw and Molepaw from that fox."

I then had to take a deep breath before going on. "Swiftflight was the real hero, I believe, and my own daughter wouldn't lie about it, either."

Once I was finished speaking, I actually felt a pang of guilt as Firestar let out an exasperated sigh and closed his eyes. "I know, Lilypetal. I know," he breathed. He then opened his eyes once again and met my gaze. "But as much as I have my own opinions, I can't let them get in the way of what's best for the Clan. I don't trust Sol any more than you do, but it would surely cause havoc to send him away while cats *believe* that he was the one to fight that fox."

He then took another quick glance at the calico tom, who was currently being showered with compliments by Poppyfrost and Berrynose. "And he's only staying tonight - no more than that, and I'll make sure that that happens."

As much as the words weren't exactly comforting, I knew that Firestar was right. "Okay, I trust you, as always," I replied to him with a sigh. "I just... this bothers me. A lot."

Firestar gave me a nod as he turned to look at me again, his eyes warm. "I understand," he meowed, putting the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "And I'm glad that you told me so."

"Good. I am too!" I replied, actually beginning to feel a bit better by

just getting my thoughts out. And after Firestar let out a purr of amusement, I gave him a small nod. "Goodnight, Firestar."

"Goodnight to you too, Lilypetal."

I flashed the leader one last warm loo before turning around and padding back towards Thornclaw, who was sitting back and watching as cats continued to surround Sol at the fresh-kill pile. He stood up straight - his chest out, his gaze hard and straight ahead with his eyes narrowed.

I couldn't help but let out a purr as I settled down beside him and ran my tail down my mate's flank. "You look pretty darn handsome when you're angry."

Thornclaw didn't look back at me, but he wrapped his own tail around my back and pulled me closer to him. "Good," he muttered. "I'm glad that I'm going to look especially attractive as I continue to be enraged by that sick tom's presence."

I snorted. "You and me both," I replied, shaking my head slowly as I looked back at the camp entrance where a certain cat had disappeared. "Poor, poor Swiftflight. This is completely unfair." *And it was horrible to see just how easily cats seemed to believe something that was against him!*

"Unfair doesn't even begin to cover it - and I was thinking that standing by during a fox attack was horrible," Thornclaw scoffed. After a moment, he then let out a sigh and took a glance up at the night sky, and then met my gaze. "It's getting late, and the two of us standing here riling ourselves up definitely isn't going to get us anywhere."

I flashed my mate an amused glance. "Want to share an extremely uncomfortable sleep together?"

"Exactly what I was thinking," Thornclaw purred, touching his nose to my ear before beginning to pad towards the warriors den. "Come on."

I trotted just behind my mate as we both crawled into the den. I

then watched, trying to hold in laughter, as Thornclaw seemed to be staring at and observing where I had placed our new nest. He even let out a small grunt as he settled down.

I began to lash my tail as I padded up to the nest myself. "What?" I asked, my voice full of laughter.

Thornclaw's eyes were warm as he shook his head slowly. "If I weren't so tired right now, I would take some time to scold you on the placement of this nest..."

I let out a teasing scoff as I settled down in the nest beside my mate. "Oh, come on!" I purred. "Let me gossip with my friend until dawn!"

Thornclaw then rolled his eyes and nuzzled my head with his muzzle as I pressed up against him. "Hm, I'll think about it," he muttered.

I gave him a single, sharp nod. "You better!" I demanded lightheartedly before leaning my head on Thornclaw's shoulder. "Goodnight. I love you."

I felt Thornclaw twin his tail with mine and rest his muzzle on my head. "I love you too, Lilypetal. Goodnight."

I then snuggled even closer to the golden tabby tom before finally closing my eyes. But as I had predicted, it was difficult with all of the emotions and thoughts that were swirling around inside of my body and mind.

I mean, Sol had used his manipulative tactics to his advantage once again, I was sure of it. As much as the Dark Forest may have once affected Swiftflight and the choices he made, I knew that he was truly trying to worm himself out of that time now.

And plus, even if that wasn't the case - what reason would *Sol* have to save two ThunderClan apprentices, when all he had done in the past is bring the Clans harm? I couldn't see how any cat could possibly believe a word that he said, and I had been glad to hear that Firestar was as uncertain as I was.

And Poppyfrost and Berrynose... Great StarClan, I wish I could have

told them how outrageous they sounded... but I wouldn't dare. I thought irritably. *I just need to calm down and trust that Firestar will send Sol away, and ThunderClan will soon see that Swiftflight was the one to-*

I then paused in my own thoughts as I realized that I wasn't in pitch-blackness anymore. In fact, I instantly recognized the Dark Forest, just where I had been in my dreams earlier in the day.

But what was strange was that this dream already wasn't going by its usually strange pattern that it had been for some days now. *No kittypet flashbacks at all?* I thought curiously before snorting. *Hm, good riddance.*

I then slowly began to scan the (unfortunately) familiar surroundings. *But unfortunately this isn't any better.*

I then turned around, instantly feeling stricken by rage as I came face to face with the gray-speckled pelt of Ashfur. He simply stared back at me, his blue eyes a mix of mischief and amusement.

And just like my last dream, he felt as present and real as if we were standing face to face in the real world.

My rage continued to rise as I lowered down into a crouch, and I felt my lips beginning to curl back into a snarl. "Dream or no dream, getting to lay one claw on your fur will feel like payback for all that you've done!"

I then was shocked to see that Ashfur was actually responsive to me, unlike the dreams I'd had before. He took a step back and raised his tail, his eyes still gleaming annoyingly.

"Ah, now I wouldn't do that if I were you," he purred, taking another step back with each time I advanced on him.

"Why not?" I hissed back. "You've given me *more* than enough reason to."

Despite not being given a reason yet, I held back, knowing that I couldn't exactly take anything Ashfur said lightly. But it didn't take me long at all to figure out what Ashfur was implying when the dark brown tabby pelt of Tigerstar emerged through the brambles -

to my complete shock and bafflement. *No... freaking... way...* I could hardly believe that I was laying my eyes on a single cat that had brought so much harm to so many.

I had actually concluded that I'd lost the ability to talk once the large, muscular tom had begun to speak. "Ah, Lilypetal," he purred ominously. "This is so wonderful - we've finally been able to reach you."

I actually managed to flash the tom a confused look. "R-reach me?"

A shiver then ran down my spine. *Oh my goodness... Swiftflight must have been right. Hm, another reason to find him more trustworthy than Sol.*

Ashfur then broke into my thoughts. "We've been trying for days now, surely," he meowed bitterly. "But some nuisance has seemingly broken off your connection here almost completely."

Before I could ask Ashfur what he meant by that vague statement, he went on. "But that doesn't matter right now. All that matters is that you're here."

"And why am I here?" I hissed to Ashfur, hating that I had to listen to his voice for this long.

"Well, Lilypetal, we wanted to have a word with you," Tigerstar answered, taking the smallest step closer to me.

I took a step back. "I certainly could have some words for you," I muttered.

Tigerstar actually purred with amusement and nudged Ashfur. "You were right - she's quite funny," he meowed before looking back at me. "Anyway, Lilypetal, to put it concisely - we've been observing how you're performing as a Clan cat recently-"

"*Observing* me?" I repeated, hardly being able to believe such a thing.

"Yes. You've definitely found your voice among these cats," Tigerstar answered. "You speak your opinion - even telling your

own leader your thoughts on this strange, scheming calico that's made his way into your camp."

"And after all that I've been through with you-"

"All that I've been put through with you," I muttered sharply, correcting Ashfur's words.

Ashfur eyes seemed to flash with anger at my interruption for a moment before continuing. "Either way, we can clearly see that you're a force to be reckoned with."

I took another step back, but not because Tigerstar had taken another step forward at all. Hearing praise like this from the two most horrible, evil cats that I knew to exist was unnerving to hear, in a way.

"It doesn't surprise me at all," Tigerstar went on, adding to my unease. "Scourge was your father after all - a very bloodthirsty, vicious cat... but he was determined and persistent, just like you are. You definitely have a lot of his ambition, and we'd like to use it."

The discomfort of being compared to my father was almost instantly overshadowed. "...What?" I breathed as I felt my legs begin to shake.

"You are surely well-aware of what we are planning beneath these trees, Lilypetal," Ashfur muttered. "The Clans have done nothing but diminish the plans we once had, and they need to pay."

I immediately hissed in response to those words. "They diminished your plans, because they were fox-hearted ones at that!"

Tigerstar ignored my harsh remark. "We need help, and although we are powerful, we could always use more recruits. We aren't enough."

"Well, that's a shame for you then, isn't it?" I growled mockingly.

Ashfur then padded closer to me, his gaze disgustingly soft. "Lilypetal, things don't have to be this way between us," he

meowed. "If you were to ban with us - be another one of the Clans cats helping us with our plan - you would continue to thrive as the resilient, strong-willed cat that you are."

No way would I ever consider training in the Dark Forest! I immediately concluded. *Thornclaw and Swiftflight left with completely good reason, and I'm not about to make their original mistake.* "You are joking, right?" I then demanded to Ashfur. "I have felt comfortable speaking up in my Clan because it is something worth standing up for. So, what would I have to gain by banning with *you?*"

Ashfur's gaze then glowed with mischief once again. "I'm surprised that something hasn't occurred to you, Lilypetal," Ashfur murmured, his eyes narrowing. "Have you not even considered the fact that if you agree to this, all of the heartbreak that I've brought you could stop?"

I couldn't help but feel struck by those words, as that had been something I'd dreamed of for countless moons now. "Could... stop?" I repeated, my voice barely a whisper.

"Yes - work with us to give the Clans what they deserve - tell us their secrets, manipulate Firestar with that trust he has in you... there are endless possibilities," Ashfur purred as his eyes gleamed with malice. "And your constant living in fear could stop. All it takes is a 'yes', and that will be gone..."

I felt Tigerstar's gaze burning into me as I continued to stand silent. "So, what is your answer?" he pressed.

I stood, conflicted, for several moments. At this point, I had committed to doing absolutely anything possible to save my family and Clan from whatever Ashfur could possibly have in store, so was I actually considering doing this in the hope that it would be the solution?

Through all of the grief and loss I had experienced because of Ashfur and his need for revenge, I was blinded by the fact that he was clearly lying to me in this moment. And he was using all of that grief and loss to manipulate me.

Me doing something as simple as helping him would not get him to stop anything. In fact, it would just give him an easier passage to make me more miserable in some way.

It took me longer than I'd like to admit for me to come to my senses.

But I finally shook my head quickly and hissed as I flashed Ashfur and Tigerstar an enraged look. "You really think that I'm that selfish?" I growled at them, then turning to a certain gray-speckled tom. "Ashfur, me wanting to put an end to you treachery isn't a matter of trying to save myself - it never was, and even if it was, I wouldn't trust a word that came out of your mouth, anyway."

I then took a step back, took a deep breath, and gave the two toms before me a hard, cold look. "My answer is absolutely no - I'm not that stupid." And with that, I quickly whipped myself around and began to walk away.

"Ah, yes," I heard Tigerstar meow smugly behind me. "We should have known - you're so incredibly loyal to that Clan of yours, one reason why we figured you'd be so valuable. But surely you'd say no." I then thought that I could hear the heavy footsteps of both Ashfur and Tigerstar begin to pad away. "Well, we'll be waiting if you change your mind."

"You'd just be wasting your time!" I called back. "I'm the one that's going to be waiting for you!"

As I then whipped myself back around, planning to run through the forest until it faded to black and I awoke, I almost felt disturbed by my own tug that I was feeling. *As risky as saying yes would be... am I making the right decision?* I wondered anxiously. *Saving my family might be worth this risk, especially when I could use being so close to Ashfur to my advantage...*

I then shook my head quickly as I continued to pelt through the Dark Forest. *There will be other ways - ones that aren't as ridiculous as this one,* I tried to tell myself. *I'm making the right decision.*

Chapter 12

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I was currently in a quite entrancing pattern, one that I had been caught up in for several moments now. This consisted of me alternating between looking at Dustystorm and Mousewhisker, who I was currently sharing a rabbit with; the fresh-kill pile, which still had many of my Clanmates huddled around Sol; and the camp entrance, the place I had watched Swiftflight run through, and he hadn't appeared *back* through since.

I was anxiously waiting for my son to return, because truthfully, I had never wanted to be next to him more. Maybe even more so than when he had completely cut himself off from me.

I had been *fuming* at every word that Sol said as he claimed that Swiftflight hadn't saved Cherrypaw and Molepaw from the fox, and I had every reason to.

I mean, I had *seen* it. I *knew* that that crazy, crowfood-eating birdbrain was lying. I would have bet all the prey I'd eat in my life on it.

And yet, cats *believed* Sol, to my complete dismay. I felt angry and mortified myself - so I couldn't even begin to imagine how my son currently felt. And as much as I had wanted to follow him out of camp, I knew that he probably needed time alone, at least for the time being.

But at this point, I was practically driving myself crazy by my anticipation of his arrival, so I decided to pull myself back to full reality and focus on the two cats in front of me - Dustystorm, who had barely left my side since the Sol confrontation like the amazing that he is, and was currently pressed up against me as he bent down to take another bite of rabbit; and Mousewhisker, who had also shown great support in this situation.

"I can't even begin to describe how weird that this is," the gray-and-white tom was meowing as he stared off at the fresh-kill pile. "I had just become a warrior when Sol came here for the first time, and I'd had no idea that he was eventually going to cause so much trouble."

I snorted after swallowing a piece of rabbit. "Exactly why we shouldn't trust him now!" I insisted bitterly. *As much as I hate to drag down my own Clanmates, I can't even try to understand what kind of logic they're going by right now.*

Mousewhisker let out a purr of amusement and shook his head slowly in response to my words. "You had never seen Sol before in your life, but it seemed as if he'd been torturing you your entire life by the way you looked at him."

"Of course! He *lied* about something that my son did!" I meowed, holding back a hiss. I then blinked a couple of times, cleared my throat, and then gave a nod back to Mousewhisker as I shifted uncomfortably. "*Our* son." *Although my time with Breezepelt is long past, the fact that ThunderClan thinks that Mousewhisker is Swiftflight's father hasn't changed!*

I gave Dustystorm a half-apologetic, half-anxious look. But to my relief, my mate simply flashed me a look full of warmth and understanding. I gave him a grateful lick on the cheek and then looked back to Mousewhisker, who winked at me and he slowly nodded. "Right," he replied, his voice clear. "I hated to see our own kit treated like that."

Phew. That was close. It's moments like these that remind me that Mousewhisker is truly a blessing from StarClan! I gave my friend another appreciative look, and then shifted closer to Dustystorm and laid my head on his shoulder. "I watched him save the apprentices from the fox," I murmured before lifting my head and looking back at Poppyfrost at the fresh-kill pile. Unfortunately, right now, just one glance at the she-cat made my fur bristle. "I don't care if I'm Swiftflight's mother. I know what I saw."

I then felt Dustystorm rest his muzzle on my head. "You don't have to convince me of that, Goldenshine. I believe you," my mate meowed comfortingly. I then lifted my head and looked at him as I

felt him shrug.

"I mean, Swiftflight doesn't have the best track record when it comes to behavior..." he went on. "But if you say he did it, I don't question it."

Wait a moment... I let out a small hiss and stood up, not being able to help feeling taken aback by my mate's words. "So you would *believe* Sol if I hadn't spoken up against him?"

Dustystorm's pale blue eyes seemed to flash with shock and fear for a moment. "I'm just going based off of what I have seen, Goldenshine," he then insisted. "But I also-"

"But that's not fair!" I demanded, cutting Dustystorm off. "He is trying to change!" *Great StarClan, please don't tell me that the love of my life is stooping so low!*

Dustystorm then stood up himself, his gaze soft as he brushed his tail against my shoulder. "Goldenshine, I wasn't finished," Dustystorm meowed softly. "As I was going to say, I also would believe you if you said he was changing."

I let out an incredible sigh of relief, partly because I had processed the fact that Dustystorm hadn't meant harm with his words. *I suppose that he has all the right to worry that Swiftflight would do what Sol claimed he did, when he had not shown the best of morals as an apprentice. I need to keep that in mind, as hard as it is,* I realized.

I then looked back at the fresh-kill pile once more, my eyes narrowing. *And unfortunately, that may have to apply to more than just Dustystorm.*

After I moment, I forced my gaze away from the gathered cats and looked back at Dustystorm. "And he has," I insisted, going off of his last words. "He's trying to, he really is." I then glanced over at Mousewhisker. "I *know* that he is."

Dustystorm flicked my ear with his tail. "Okay, then it's established," he purred.

Mousewhisker gave a sharp nod in agreement, and I almost had to

suppress a purr of amusement at his next words, spoken somewhat loudly. "I'd only expect that much from *our son!*"

"Good, I'm glad," I meowed, my voice full of laughter, before giving Dustystorm an affectionate nuzzle as a gesture of apology for my lashing out at him for... *no* good reason, really. I then pulled away to meet his heart-melting, soft gaze. *And of course, he handles it like a champ.*

I then looked back at Mousewhisker, as I was suddenly eager to know more about the calico tom who had so confidently walked into a territory that wasn't his, and then lied to many cats straight to their faces. "So, you said that you were a warrior the first time that Sol came..." I began. "What's-"

I then cut off my own words as I looked back at the camp entrance once more, my ears flicking as I immediately recognized the dark gray pelt of Swiftflight making his way into the clearing. His head was low, and his eyes looked dark and tired.

I stood up. "Um... I have to go," I meowed urgently, then turned back to dip my head in farewell to my friend. "I'll talk to you later, Mousewhisker."

I then faced Dustystorm and gave him a lick on the cheek, taking in his scent for just a moment before I had to leave. "See you in our nest in just a bit, love."

Then, without waiting for a reply from either tom, I quickly whipped myself around and ran up to meet Swiftflight, who didn't even look up to meet my gaze, but he still stopped in his tracks.

I settled down in front of him, flashing him a warm look. "Hey, shrew-lover," I meowed affectionately, brushing his shoulder lightly with my tail. "How are you doing?"

I actually took a step back, startled, as Swiftflight let out a hiss and looked at me with angry, blazing eyes. "Take another look at the day that I've had and figure it out!"

I simply stared back at him, wide-eyed as I tried to suppress alarm.

But as soon as Swiftflight noticed my fear, he let out an exasperated sigh and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry," he breathed.

I let out a quiet purr of amusement and gave Swiftflight a quick lick on the ear. "It's okay," I reassured him. "So, did your walk help at all?"

Swiftflight rolled his eyes and snorted. "It helped me to further process how frustrated I am," he muttered irritably. "I mean, Sol *lied*, and so many cats appear to believe him."

I then twitched my whiskers with intrigue as Swiftflight let out a seemingly disbelieving purr of amusement. "Poppyfrost seemed like she would have defended him to her death," he then continued before lowering his head. "It's all tough to deal with. But..."

"But what?" I prompted to my son after he had trailed off of his words.

To my misfortune, Swiftflight simply closed his eyes and lashed his tail dismissively. "Nothing."

"Okay..." I murmured, staring back at Swiftflight with a single eyebrow raised, but I quickly dismissed the subject as he had wanted me to. "Well, listen - I know that *nothing* but crowfood was coming out of Sol's mouth, whether cats think he was telling the truth or not. I saw you bravely fight that fox, and I'm going to continue to defend that however I can-"

"But what's the point?" Swiftflight then demanded, not letting me finish what I had been meowing.

I was taken by surprise by the question. "What?"

Swiftflight's eyes were big and full of regret as he fully turned to face me. "Why would you want to defend me?" he asked, his voice husky. "I've hurt you so much. I didn't talk to you for so many-"

I sharply shook my head and raised my tail for silence. "Swiftflight, we don't need to open that tunnel passage again," I insisted to him as I tried to push down the resurfacing hurt and grief I had felt for all of those moons. Those tough days were over now, I knew it.

"You're my *son*, and that's enough on its own for me to want to defend you."

I then took a step closer to Swiftflight and wrapped my tail around his back. "But along with that, you are trying to change, and I'm so proud of you," I continued softly. "I just was telling one of your former mentors and your foster father about it!"

I felt encouraged when Swiftflight managed to let out a small purr of amusement, so I further consoled him. "And even if all of that was irrelevant, I told you - I saw you do it with my own eyes."

"But what if you *hadn't* seen me do it?" Swiftflight then demanded, his eyes wide with dismay as he looked up at me. "Would you still believe that I had been the one to save them?"

I blinked, shocked by the near-accusation my son had just thrown at me. But... I couldn't help but reflect on that question for a moment.

I mean, if this fox incident had happened a few moons earlier, I genuinely would question as to whether Swiftflight would really hold back from saving his Clanmates, based on what Ashfur had manipulated Swiftflight into during his training in the Dark Forest.

I actually felt a small twinge of nerves at this thought. But then, I looked back at Swiftflight from where I had been staring ahead, and met his gray-blue gaze. I could practically feel my heart melting with all of the truth and hurt that I saw in his eyes. As I had ruthlessly insisted to Dustystorm and Mousewhisker - this cat was trying to change, and carried so much heaviness in his heart because of his past.

Overwhelmed with love and as much happiness as I could feel under the circumstances, I bent my head down and touched my muzzle to my son's head. "Yes, Swiftflight," I replied softly. "I would."

After a moment, Swiftflight pulled away from me, and I caught his eyes flashing with affection for a heartbeat. Unfortunately though, I could tell that he didn't seem completely convinced of my answer, as truthful as it was. "Okay," he meowed quietly, and then let out a

sigh and slowly turned around. "I'm going to sleep."

"Alright," I replied, my heart sinking as I watched Swiftflight walk off, his tail dragging on the ground. "Goodnight."

Once he had disappeared into the warriors den, I looked a little ways ahead towards the medicine den, something catching my eye. The pale ginger tabby pelt of Lionblaze was currently making his way out, while Jayfeather stared after him.

Strangely, this sight brought a chill down my spine. It took me a moment, but I then recalled the words that Hollyleaf had told me just days ago - bone-chilling, practically incomprehensible ones that made me question so much about three of my Clanmates.

It had left me with a lot on my mind, and seeing Lionblaze leaving Jayfeather, who he had clearly just spoken with, reminded me of something that I desperately needed to speak with the gray tabby medicine cat about.

I had actually backed out of it a few times, scared of the conversation's aftermath, as well as bothering Jayfeather when he clearly had so much on his shoulders. But I knew that I had to go through with it eventually - it was in his best interest, and I was sure of that.

Now, while Briarlight was *hopefully* asleep, and Jayfeather was *hopefully* not caught up in a task, I was going to take advantage of the opportunity.

I took a deep breath and began to pad over to the medicine den, trying to push down all of the nerves and reluctance welling up inside of me. *I need to do this*, I kept telling myself. *Goldenshine, you need to do this. He will surely object - but you need to do this.*

"Goldenshine?"

I stopped in my tracks as I heard a familiar, kind voice call out my name. I took a pawstep back and peered into the apprentices den, where I immediately met Cherrypaw's worried gaze. "Cherrypaw?" I whispered to her. "Is everything alright?"

The ginger she-cat sat up in her nest and gave me a nod. "Yes!" she replied. She then let her head hang low. "Well... fine, at least." Just a moment later, she lifted her head back up to reveal her big, concerned amber eyes. "I wanted to ask... is Swiftflight okay?"

Mmhm... I thought smugly as I gave a small nod of understanding and tried to suppress a wry smile. "He's not doing the best right now, Cherrypaw," I answered my apprentice honestly, "But I'm sure that he *will* be very soon."

Cherrypaw let out a small sigh of relief. "Okay... good," she breathed. She then shyly lowered her head back down as her gaze flitted all around the den. "I wanted to ask him myself, but I didn't know if he wanted me bothering him."

I snorted almost inaudibly. "I think you'd be surprised," I muttered.

"What did you say?" Cherrypaw asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Nothing," I replied quickly, shaking my head urgently. I then meowed more softly, "That's thoughtful, sweetheart. But honestly, I think he'd appreciate your support."

Cherrypaw immediately lightened up at those words. "Really?"

"Really," I insisted as I padded up to touch my nose to one of Cherrypaw's ears. "Now, get some sleep! I don't want to be dragging a ginger lump of fur out of camp for training tomorrow."

Cherrypaw purred with amusement and settled back down in her moss nest. "Okay, Goldenshine," she whispered, her mouth opening up into a yawn as she lowered her head. "See you tomorrow."

I flashed the younger she-cat one last affectionate look before leaving the den and continuing to travel across camp, having to push down nerves once again. I hesitantly peeked into the medicine den to find that Briarlight, thank *StarClan*, was fast asleep, and Jayfeather was grooming himself. I slowly and reluctantly crawled through the bramble screen and into the den.

Jayfeather seemed to sense my presence immediately. "Hey," he muttered as he licked a paw and ran it over his ear.

"Hi, Jayfeather," I replied, taking another step closer to him. "Can I talk to you?"

The gray tabby tom sniffed. "I know that you tend to be slow, but I'd hope you'd be aware that that's what you're doing right now."

I rolled my eyes, but reminded myself once again that this talk surely wasn't going to be easy. "I am rolling on the ground from how hard I am laughing," I murmured emotionlessly. I then hardened my meow. "This is serious."

"I'm sure that it is," Jayfeather then meowed sarcastically.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep calm. "Okay, I know that you have plenty of reasons to scoff right now, but can you give me the time of day for just a moment?" I demanded, my voice releasing a bit of my helplessness. "You need to hear this."

Thankfully, with that, Jayfeather finally let out a huff and seemed to give in. I immediately turned around and began to lead him out of his den. "Follow me."

I continued to feel a bit relieved as I heard the sound of the medicine cat's pawsteps come from just behind me. I gave a nod to Bumblestripe, who was currently standing guard, before crawling through the gorse tunnel. Once the two of us were out of sight of anyone in the stone hollow, I gently pulled Jayfeather to the side with my tail, and I watched as he settled down in front of me and gave me a half-annoyed, half-inquiring look.

My heart suddenly began to beat significantly faster from how terrified I was. There was no turning back with this now. "Okay. Listen, Jayfeather..." I then trailed off, having to take a deep breath. "I've been contemplating this, and..."

I had to take yet another moment to pause and contain myself. *Here goes...*

I met the medicine cat's blind gaze, and made my voice sharp and clear. "I think that I should further oversee the Snowstorm situation on my own."

I slightly cringed back as I watched Jayfeather stand up, his blue eyes widening. "*What?*" he nearly exclaimed. "Are you messing with me?"

I was surprised with how alarmed Jayfeather seemed by my statement. "No!"

"You're not?" he demanded, his voice continuing to rise and his fur bristling. "Then... *why?*"

"Because I think that I finally can," I replied evenly. *And because you literally have the destiny of the Clans on your shoulders, what do you think?*

"Have you gone insane?" Jayfeather then growled as he began to pace the area. "Since when has figuring out Snowflight's destiny become something that needs to be done independently?"

As angry as Jayfeather was getting, I wasn't going to back down. I had wanted to break this to him as soon as Hollyleaf had told me about the power that he held, and I wasn't going to let him deal with more than he needed to.

And not to mention, when it made him especially snappy.

"Since you've changed. Something's different, Jayfeather. I can tell," I answered him. "You have a lot on your mind, and if I can take something away from you to worry about, then I will."

Jayfeather stopped pacing and whipped his head over to look at me. "I've *changed?*" he repeated, his voice then rising even more as he padded up to me. "I have a lot on my mind? What in the name of StarClan are you basing this off of?"

I froze, instantly hesitating to answer that question.

Jayfeather's gaze was hard as he stared back at me. "Goldenshine?" he meowed angrily, prompting me to answer him.

As I continued to find the right words - those words having to explain that his own *sister* revealed so much to me - I watched as Jayfeather's tense demeanor then seemed to relax, and he let out a

small grunt.

A chill then ran down my spine as he met my gaze, his eyes focused and knowing, almost as if he could see. After a moment of silence, he then meowed grimly, his eyes narrowed, "Who told you?"

I nearly let out a gasp in response to what I had just witnessed, but I quickly pushed away that shock and simply shrugged back at Jayfeather. "I don't have to tell you that." And before he could protest, I went on. "Jayfeather, that doesn't matter right now. What does is *what* this cat told me - you have a big destiny ahead of you, and it practically gets bigger with each day."

I then took a step closer to the medicine cat, hardening my gaze even though he couldn't see it. "Which is why I will take this on my own."

"And I *refuse* to accept that!" Jayfeather instantly demanded. I was then surprised to see his blue eyes grow softer. "Goldenshine, Snowflight was my apprentice, and was for many moons." He then sighed and looked away from me. "As much as I hated that I was, I even began to see her as more than that. She may be gone, but I still care about her... a lot..."

I then raised a single eyebrow as the medicine cat hesitated. After a few heartbeats, he then breathed, "...Even after I'd thought I'd fallen for someone else."

I was immediately overcome with shock. *Jayfeather loved someone else after Snowflight? I didn't think he'd ever...* I then shook my head quickly, pulling myself out of my thoughts. "*What?*" I nearly shouted, my eyes wide. "Who-"

Jayfeather quickly cut me off, flashing me another hardened gaze. "You didn't tell me who told you about Lionblaze, Dovewing and I, so I don't have to tell you about my situation, either," he hissed sharply. His eyes then washed over with sadness as he sat down. "Listen, I may not show it, but sometimes Snowflight's death still feels like a fresh wound, and no matter how many times I dab cobwebs on it or try to treat it with marigold, it won't heal."

The medicine cat then took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "It's made me realize that I loved her a lot more than I originally let myself accept."

I nodded in understanding. "Okay, but-"

"Which is why I don't want to let her down, to give you one reason as to why this idea of yours is mouse-brained!" Jayfeather insisted as he stood up. "She is surely counting on me to figure this out for her - not to leave her sister to do all of the work!"

His voice then rose again with his next words. "I was the one that knew she had returned in the first place, and the one that concluded that she hadn't been released yet," he hissed, his teeth gritted. "Goldenshine, I'm not letting you do this on your own."

"And I'm not letting you have a choice," I hissed back at him. "I'm only thinking of you!"

"Foxdung to that!" Jayfeather exclaimed. "You clearly aren't thinking at *all* if you think that this is a good decision!"

"Neither are you, if you think that it is wise to take on with so much at once!" I replied, ignoring his harsh words. "Jayfeather, you are a part of a prophecy that is meant to *save* the Clans, for StarClan's sake! I have to do this."

"It's going to be a lost cause if you take it on by yourself. Can you not see that?" Jayfeather demanded, his eyes now filled with hurt and resentment.

I sighed with exasperation and shrugged. "I may not be a medicine cat, but I am Snowflight's sister, which already gives me the power I need to be able to release her."

I then began to back away from the gray tabby tom. "You shouldn't have to worry about this, which is why I am saying, for the last time - *I am doing this on my own*."

I tried with all of my might to ignore Jayfeather's blazing gaze, and finally turned around.

"Goodnight, Jayfeather," I murmured, only briefly glancing back at the medicine cat before stomping through the gorse tunnel and towards the warriors den.

Chapter 13

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

Sol, my former apprentice may be a cranky furball at times, but he's not a malicious bystander...

I could almost visualize the images and words bouncing off of the bramble walls as my mind spiraled with all of the moments I was reliving from yesterday's horrible events. They seemed to be haunting me as strongly as Ashfur ever had.

...Of course Swiftflight would say anything to help his reputation...

...Are you so sure about that? His past wouldn't do the best job of backing that up...

I let out a quiet, frustrated hiss, as those last words spoken by Sol always nearly felt like a physical scratch across my chest each time they crossed my mind again. *His past wouldn't do the best job of backing that up...*

I sighed and shifted in my nest from where I lied alone in the warriors den, going from lying on my back to settling down on my stomach, although every position I would attempt would surely not feel comfortable.

His past wouldn't do the best job of backing that up...

I let out a hiss of frustration, my thoughts jabbing at me like the most annoying woodpecker that could possibly be created. "Great StarClan," I muttered irritably to myself, beginning to push the mouse in front of me back and forth mindlessly with my paws. *Why did Sol have to cause all of that to resurface in the first place? I certainly didn't need a reminder of how I used to act!* I thought. *How did he even know about how selfish I was? Why was he so horrible as to use it to his advantage?*

I then angrily pushed my mouse to the side. *And so many cats believed him...* I recalled solemnly. *They... they believed that* I *had been the one to lie. They barely had to give it a second thought!*

I then felt my ears flatten and my shoulders sink as a sad, but truthful realization then seemed to be laid out in front of me. As much as I hated to admit it, these Clanmates who doubted me... honestly had all the right to. Sol was right - my past wouldn't back me up very well, and this situation had surely reminded many cats of how cold-hearted I had used to be.

They have all the reason to think that I did what Sol is saying that I did... or rather didn't do. That was my problem when I was under Ashfur's controlling trap. It wasn't what I did do, it was what I didn't *do that made me such a terrible cat,* I thought as I shook my head slowly. *Wow... my past choices are definitely having an effect on my future, aren't they? But it all still feels unfair, because my past choices don't represent who I'm trying to be now.*

I then let out another sigh and pulled my mouse back in front of me with a single paw, a piece of prey that Snowstorm had brought to me just a little earlier - Snowstorm being one of the cats that actually believed me, even despite all she had seen of my past.

And thank *StarClan,* she wasn't the only one. Goldenshine, Lilypetal, Thornclaw, Ivypool, Foxleap, Cherrypaw, and some senior warriors all had willingly defended me. They either trusted me, or just knew what Sol was like and were already set on not trusting a word that he said.

But yet, I had never known the strange calico cat at all, but I knew for sure that he was trouble. I mean, he lied. Unless I had been in some weird, unconscious kind of shut-down mode, and Goldenshine had been hallucinating, I had been the one to scare off the fox. Which I *had* - I would never forget how amazing I felt afterwards, having saved Cherrypaw and Molepaw from danger, and wiping away the only other scary memory of a fox that I'd had.

So, that meant that Sol had lied, which clearly meant that he couldn't be trusted. Even if cats didn't trust me, why couldn't they tell that Sol was trouble all on his own? He didn't need another cat

in the mix to reveal his manipulative, deceiving ways. After what I'd been through, I could smell even the smallest amounts of manipulation and deception *anywhere*.

And now that Firestar has sent Sol away from ThunderClan after his one-night stay, all that Sol has left to the Clan is this lie, I thought, my claws unsheathing and sinking into the ground. *And I'm left here to deal with it as if it isn't a lie at all!*

My exasperated and anxious thoughts continued to bubble up inside of me to the point that I could barely stand it. And without thinking, I angrily let out another hiss and slashed unsheathed claws across my nest, moss flying out in all directions.

My eyes widened as I looked around at the mess that I'd made. *StarClan's kits...*

I then quickly lowered my paw down and took a deep breath, telling myself that I needed to calm down. *I can't let this get to me as much as Sol surely wanted it to,* I pressed to myself. *That's not going to help me prove my innocence to my Clanmates, if there's any chance of that at all.*

My gaze then shifted to the den entrance - sunhigh's passage to lighting the warriors den - and then down to the Snowstorm's mouse that was still untouched.

I then let out a huff, picked up the mouse, and stood up. *And neither is secluding myself from everyone else,* I realized, then beginning to slowly pad forward. *I'll at least take this mouse out and eat it just outside of the den.*

For just a moment, I was overcome with dread as I crawled through the den entrance and out into the open. I could instantly feel some of my Clanmate's gazes burning into my dark gray pelt, and I nervously returned each and every one, no matter how cold or distant some of them were. To my relief, some of them were actually sympathetic.

This made me feel a bit more comfortable, so I casually settled down in my pre-planned spot and finally began to eat my mouse. It

wasn't until I felt my teeth sinking into its soft flesh that I realized how hungry I was. *I don't think I've eaten since the fox attack yesterday!*

I had only taken a couple bites out of the mouse when I noticed movement by the camp entrance. I lifted my head slightly to see that Goldenshine, Rosepetal, Molepaw and Cherrypaw seemed to be returning from a training session. I watched as they all padded over to the fresh-kill and then took their picks. Well, Cherrypaw, Molepaw, and Rosepetal did, at least.

Goldenshine practically looked as if she wasn't aware of anything around her, even her own son, whose gaze was burning into her at the moment. She simply stood near the fresh-kill pile, clearly very deep in thought as she took nervous glances towards the medicine den every few heartbeats.

Honestly, as weird as the sight was, it wasn't new. My mother always seemed to have something on her mind lately, and as curious as I was about it, I was never sure if it was my business.

Next to Goldenshine, Rosepetal and Molepaw were settling down with the prey they had picked. Then, my heart skipped a beat, and my ears flicked with surprise as my gaze shifted to see that Cherrypaw seemed to be taking her prey (and herself) over to where I was.

My heart immediately began to pound, and I shifted in my spot as my fur seemed to prickle. I was incredibly shocked by my own nerves, and honestly, after the conversation that I had had with Snowstorm about Cherrypaw yesterday, it seemed even worse than usual, for some reason.

But nevertheless, I pushed it all down and attempted to speak to the ginger she-cat. "Hi, Cherrypaw," I meowed to her, letting my tail lay flat on the ground so that it wouldn't twitch anxiously.

Cherrypaw's tail raised high in the air as she stopped and stood in front of me. "Hi, Swiftflight!" she meowed cheerfully. Her head then lowered, but her big amber eyes looked back at me shyly. I tried to suppress a purr, not being able to help feeling excited in

anticipation of what she was going to say.

"Is... is it okay if I sit with you?" she then meowed as she shifted her paws back and forth. She had only locked gazes with me for one moment before her own seemed to flash with regret, and she looked away. "I understand if you-"

I cut off Cherrypaw's words as soon as I could. "No, that's okay," I insisted gently to her. I then nodded to the space beside me, secretly really hoping that her ginger pelt would soon fill that spot. Through my sadness and frustration of yesterday's happenings, I had really wanted to be alone as much as possible, yet I instantly felt that Cherrypaw's company would be fulfilling. "Go right ahead."

Cherrypaw's eyes lit up at my words. "Okay!" she purred, giving a single lash of her tail.

I then watched as the ginger she-cat quickly trotted up, dropped her prey, and then settled down beside me. I couldn't help but wish that the gap between our two flanks was smaller, but I wouldn't have *dared* make any sort of advance on Cherrypaw if she wasn't comfortable.

So, I shook that thought away and purred with amusement as I pointed to Cherrypaw's prey with my muzzle, which I could proudly say was a shrew. "I see you picked out the best kind of prey in the forest to eat."

Cherrypaw gave me an eager nod after she swallowed her first bite. "The best kind of prey in the forest by far!" she exclaimed, then lightly nudged me with her tail. "Goldenshine gives me grief every time I catch one now, thanks to that silly debate that you all had!"

I gave her a nudge right back. "Hey, it was your decision to agree with me!" I replied, my voice full of laughter. I then brought my head closer to hers and lowered my voice just a bit. "And we're going to continue to give her a hard time until our final days, right?"

Cherrypaw returned my mischievous look, and my heart skipped a beat as she shifted just a bit closer to me. "Of course," she purred.

"You need to come and watch another one of our training sessions soon - you and I could go hunting and only bring Goldenshine back shrews!"

"And say that we chased all of the thrushes out?" I questioned the she-cat, narrowing my eyes.

"Precisely!" Cherrypaw replied with a sharp nod. "I can already see the look on her face - the same one that she gives me when I beat her in a race, or surprise-attack her..."

I lifted my head up again and twitched my whiskers with intrigue. "Wait a moment..." I murmured, trying to hold in laughter. "You *surprise-attack* my mother?"

I released my laughter as Cherrypaw gave a definitive nod once again. She seemed so satisfied and confident with her sneaky behavior towards her mentor - it was amusing. "With sheathed claws, of course, but it's so fun to do at dawn when we're just heading out and she's still sort of groggy," she explained. "It wakes her right up!"

I shook my head slowly back at the she-cat. "You tend to do that, don't you?" I purred as I recalled one early morning from a few moons ago. "Snowstorm got my attention just before you tried to surprise-attack me that one morning."

Cherrypaw then let out a huff and rolled her eyes. "Ugh, I was so close! I was a tail-length away from leaping onto your back!" she meowed as she teasingly swiped a sheathed paw in front of my face. Her amber eyes then widened as she lowered her paw. "Wow, Swiftflight! I'm surprised you remember that! It was all so silly... *I'd* like to forget!"

"I could never forget that frustrated look on your face after Snowstorm blew your cover," I replied as I continued to purr, actually thinking back to that very moment. "It was so cute."

I then practically clamped my own mouth shut, and my eyes widened as I realized what I had just said out loud. I then found that I was incredibly reluctant to look back at Cherrypaw as I heard

her let out a small giggle.

I nervously forced myself to look back at her as she finally spoke. "Cute?" she mewed softly as she gazed bashfully back at me. "Really?"

My ears had already grown immensely hot by this point. *I cannot believe that I just said that out loud. What's wrong with me?* "Well, that could describe it, I-I guess," I stammered like I never had before. "Maybe delightful... or amusing would be a better word..."

As I looked away once again, I could see Cherrypaw slowly nodding beside me. "I see..." she purred quietly. She then seemed to flash me a half-nervous, half-teasing look before bending her head down and taking another bite of her prey.

I slowly returned my gaze back to her and watched as she took her bite. I then found my fur beginning to tingle again as I looked at her, hoping and praying to StarClan that she wasn't noticing. As determined as I had been to back out on my words to Cherrypaw earlier, that certainly didn't mean that they weren't true. *Cherrypaw is* incredibly *cute...*

After the she-cat had swallowed her bite, I continued to watch as she looked back at me, her eyes full of concern. She then appeared to be saying something.

But I honestly didn't catch a word. I shook my head quickly, then focused on Cherrypaw's gaze once again. "Hm?" I prompted to her, needing her to repeat herself. I had been getting lost in her amber eyes as they reflected against the sunlight, and I truthfully couldn't have been able to focus on much more.

Cherrypaw didn't seem to mind, and shifted herself closer to me as she replied, "I wanted to ask how you were doing. I... I'm so sorry," she meowed worriedly. Her gaze then grew darker. "And I'm so, so sorry about-"

I quickly put the tip of my tail on Cherrypaw's shoulder, willing her to stop her words right there. "It's okay, really," I reassured her. Despite me being one to not share my feelings regularly, I found

that I easily felt that I could confide in Cherrypaw. I also deeply appreciated her concern and her support of me in this situation thus far, so I figured that she deserved to know.

I let out a sigh and met Cherrypaw's gaze. "Well, I'm frustrated, if I'm being honest with you," I meowed, then let out sniff. "Obviously, I can be sure of what I did. I know that Sol is lying, but..."

"But, what?" Cherrypaw asked as I had trailed off.

I took a deep breath, telling myself that I could trust the ginger she-cat with the words I was going to say. "But what is frustrating is the fact that the cats that don't trust me... have all the right to not trust me," I murmured solemnly. "The way I acted as an apprentice was... despicable." *Quite despicable. It was only days ago that I was like that!*

Cherrypaw gasped and blinked at my words. "Despicable?" she exclaimed. "Hardly, Swiftflight!"

"No, it's true. And that's just one way to put it..." I insisted to her. I then let out a snort and shyly lowered my head to the ground. "Listen, Cherrypaw. I would completely understand if you said you believed Sol had been the one to save you." I kind of enjoyed the fact that she saw me as a hero for a bit, there. *But I need to accept the blow if she also thinks I'm a lying fox-heart, but is scared to admit it.*

I was surprised to see Cherrypaw immediately shake her head. "But I don't!" she demanded as she brushed her tail against my shoulder. "Not at all. I've always believed that it was you, even after what Sol said."

I stared wide-eyed back at my friend. "Really?" I questioned her, shocked by her certainty. "Did you actually see me do it, then?"

Cherrypaw purred with amusement as she shook her head again. "No! Is that the only way you think that I could be sure?" she meowed. I then watched as her gaze slowly turned from shock to warmth. "Swiftflight, I don't need that kind of evidence to believe that you'd do something as amazing as that."

After these words, my eyes then locked with Cherrypaw's, and my

heart began to beat significantly faster once again.

I was completely flustered. I suddenly forgot how to talk. Running into the medicine den and getting checked over actually occurred to me for a moment.

But at the same time, I also never wanted to move. "Th-thank you," I breathed, my gaze not leaving the amber eyes they were looking at. "I..."

"Cherrypaw!"

Cherrypaw and I both quickly broke our gazes at the sound of her name, and I glanced over deeper into camp to see Poppyfrost a little ways ahead. Her blue gaze was completely unreadable as she stared back at the two of us. "I need your help collecting moss so that I can repair my nest in the warriors den," she called out as soon as she knew she had her daughter's attention. "Your father seemed to be complaining half of the night about the old moss!"

Cherrypaw looked reluctant and dismayed as she stared back at her mother. "Oh..." she breathed, taking a quick glance at me before nodding to her prey below her. "But... I haven't even finished my shrew. Couldn't you get Molepaw or Jayfeather to help you?"

My shoulders seemed to tense as Poppyfrost's gaze became harder. "Cherrypaw," she meowed more sharply. "*Right now.*"

I blinked in surprise. *What's the hurry?*

To my dismay, Cherrypaw let out a sigh and finally seemed to give in. "Okay, I'm coming," she murmured as she stood up. She then turned back to me, her gaze a bit more bright. "Bye, Swiftflight! Maybe soon we can-"

"Cherrypaw, hurry, before the moss starts growing on me," Poppyfrost meowed impatiently as her tortoiseshell tail lashed back and forth.

With that, Cherrypaw let out a frustrated sigh and gave me one last apologetic, regretful look before quickly trotting over to her mother. I watched her go, not being able to ignore the tugging

disappointment that I felt. Obviously, me being a new warrior, and Cherrypaw being a busy apprentice, we wouldn't get to spend much time together anyway, yet I still felt a pang of longing as I watched her go.

Then, as the mother and daughter began to pad over to the fallen tree where most of ThunderClan's moss grew, my eyes narrowed as my eyes fell on Poppyfrost, who, for some reason, seemed to hold a bigger grudge on me than any of my other Clanmates. She had been shooting me hostile glances that Cherrypaw definitely wasn't aware of, and they clearly revealed how she felt about me at the moment.

It was strange. She was surely one of the cats thinking that I had lied about saving her kits, but she had basically been the one to prompt Sol's lie in the first place. She'd seemed hostile with me even before he'd arrived in ThunderClan at all!

Sure, she had every right to question my actions, as some of my Clanmates were doing. But why did she seem so *determined* to do so? What reason did she have to do that?

Chapter 14

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I had already lost count of the amount of eager glances that had been shot my way as I sat in my spot in the training hollow, watching as Dustystorm, Nightwing and Birchfall trained my three kits. They wouldn't dare say it out loud, but I was pretty sure that Emberpaw, Lightningpaw and Wrenpaw were quite excited to have their mother overseeing them.

My decision to do so had actually been a pretty late-notice one, and I had almost forced myself go out after I had had another myriad of uneasy dreams the night before, as per usual.

For one, the kittypet dreams had returned, more vivid and stronger than ever before. The images of me wandering around my Twoleg home, looking out the window, and staring out into the forest from my fence seemed so real, that I had actually questioned for a moment as to whether or not I had ever become a Clan cat, and that my time as a warrior had been the part that was a dream.

Beyond that... *vision*, you could say, was more darkness - no Dark Forest, just *darkness*. But despite that, I couldn't have been more sure that Dark Forest was trying to reach me again. I hadn't been able to see Ashfur or Tigerstar, but by the amount of apprehension and tension I felt even in rest, I could almost feel their presence... like they were waiting for me. Waiting for me to give them my final answer on their proposal.

I had given them my decision - *heck* to the *no* - yet the two pieces of foxdung seemed to think otherwise.

So basically, it had just been another uncomfortable night of sleep, or lack thereof. And I wanted to escape from all of the nervous, swirling thoughts that it brought me for just a moment.

And luckily, my mode of escape was working quite well - my three kits learning how to fight for the first time being quite entertaining.

They were currently learning the leap-and-hold, which I remembered to be one of the first moves that Firestar had taught me. Dustystorm, Nightwing, and Birchfall were currently introducing my kits to the move, and I have to say - I was very proud to see how intently they were listening to their mentors' directions.

"So, it's mainly just meant to throw off the cat you're fighting?" Emberpaw questioned once Birchfall finished explaining the move.

Dustystorm gave his apprentice an approving nod. "It can be," he answered. "But it's also a great means of being able to inflict wounds on your opponent without them being able to reach you."

"If your opponent is smart, they'll roll over to get you off of them within heartbeats," Nightwing added on, "but if *you* are quick, you can still cause some damage!"

I then had to suppress a purr of amusement as I noticed Lightningpaw's yellow eyes briefly flash with fear. "I hope my opponent isn't smart..." he murmured before turning to look at his golden tabby-and-white sister, his gaze now teasing. "Emberpaw, can I try it on you?"

Emberpaw gasped and looked wide-eyed back at her brother. "Hey!"

I let out a small grunt of disapproval. *Deprecating humor - not gonna slide.* I luckily got Lightningpaw's attention with a quick clearing of my throat. Once he met my gaze, I gave my son a half-amused, half-warning look.

He luckily returned my gaze, flashing me an apologetic look before turning back to his sister. "Sorry, Emberpaw. You're really smart," he admitted, lightly nudging her shoulder with a paw. "But I still want to try the move on you."

Emberpaw immediately whipped her head around to look at Wrenpaw, who was just a bit behind her. "Is that okay?" she asked

her brother, her head tilted to the side.

The brown tabby tom dipped his head. "Sure," he replied. "You can try the move on me next."

Then, as Emberpaw gave Wrenpaw a nod and began to get into position for Lightningpaw to jump onto her back, I couldn't help but begin to beam with satisfaction as I watched how overall kind and respectful my kits were towards each other. Sure, they always had their bickers, and each received their fair share of teasing, but with the amazing bond that the three of them shared, it never went beyond that. Thornclaw and I were so happy to see how well they got along, *and we hope it will stay that way...*

I then watched in anticipation as Lightningpaw crouched down, and after a few heartbeats, proceeded to leap up and land on Emberpaw's back. For a moment, it appeared as if he'd had a steady landing and would be able to mock-give his sister a few wounds, but I nearly let out an alarmed yelp as he quickly lost his balance and fell onto his side.

Shoot, shoot, shoot! I quickly stood up as Lightningpaw hissed a curse. "Foxdung!"

"Lightningpaw, are you alright?" I asked urgently, hovering over his black and white pelt.

To my relief, my son almost immediately stood up and shook out his fur as Wrenpaw and Emberpaw stared worriedly at him. "Yeah, I'm fine!" he insisted. His eyes then washed over with frustration and disappointment. "But I didn't land well at all."

I stepped forward and licked Lightningpaw's head comfortingly. "That's okay! It would be strange if you perfected the move the first time you tried it," I insisted. I then nervously scanned over his pelt. "Are you sure that you didn't hurt yourself?"

Lightningpaw gave me an eager nod, seemingly having been encouraged by my words. "Yes, mother! Don't worry."

"Okay..." I breathed before glancing over and Emberpaw and

Wrenpaw. "Listen, you all are just trying out the move, so try to be..."

I then trailed off of my own sentence as my gaze then fell on the three mentors, whose eyes were all filled with humor as they patiently watched.

I gave them a sheepish, apologetic look before nodding to my kits and slowly returning to my original spot. "Annnnnddd, I am going to back away now," I murmured as I let my eyes flit around the clearing. My kits were purring with amusement by the time I sat down. "The last thing that you three need is a mother fretting over your apprentices," I then commented to Dustystorm, Birchfall and Nightwing.

Birchfall exchanged an amused glance with Dustystorm before nodding to me. "That's quite alright, Lilypetal." The pale tabby tom then turned to my kits. "And that was actually a very good attempt, Lightningpaw. Let's have Emberpaw and Wrenpaw try the move, and then we'll give you all tips after."

Lightningpaw dipped his head and stepped back as Wrenpaw padded up and gave Emberpaw a quick flick on the ear. "Good luck," he meowed, nodding curtly before turning and getting into position.

Emberpaw gave her brother a warm look of acknowledgement, but as soon as she began to pad behind him out of his sight, she let out a quiet snort and rolled her eyes. "Good luck!" she mouthed, mocking her brother's formalness.

I purred at my daughter's mocking, but gave her a quick warning glance just as I had done to Lightningpaw. I then watched as she tried the move herself. And she was shaky, but I could already be certain that she'd have it down in no time.

Wrenpaw had a lot of promise as well, but unfortunately had weighed Lightningpaw down a bit with his strong build when he landed on his back.

And once poor Lightningpaw's back was free from the extra weight,

and he took a moment to recover, the three began to receive pointers on the move. And the more that I watched my three kits state earnestly and attentively at their mentors, the bigger that my heart seemed to grow with pride and love for my three little bundles. *They are so incredibly dear to me,* I thought. *Thornclaw and Mistpelt were only the beginnings of me learning what it means to love something so incredibly much.*

I could still hardly believe that I had nearly lost my second litter when Ashfur led them out to the ice-covered lake. That had truly been one of the most traumatizing experiences of my whole life, and I knew that I couldn't bear to experience anything similar to that again - with my kits, or anyone at all that I cared about. It was *un*bearable!

These thoughts made me wonder about Ashfur's and Tigerstar's proposition all over again. Were they able to somehow see just how fearful I was of me losing someone else I loved? Could they sense that I actually hadn't been completely sure of my answer to them, and was that why they still seemed to be trying to reach me?

As sound as the decision had been to say "no" to them, I really, really wondered that if I were to team up with Ashfur and Tigerstar, that Ashfur would genuinely stop finding any means of hurting my family.

I mean, if I was with him all of the time, I could keep an eye on him... maybe even distract him while I was there?

But as easy as that could be, I didn't want to take any chances either... Ashfur had proven countless times over how untrustworthy he was. Great StarClan, I was torn. Torn into two perfectly, evenly-sized pieces.

I narrowed my eyes and stared off at nothing as I continued to contemplate. *Well, I'm going to make use of something that is coming my way - whether that's with Ashfur's proposition, or with what's coming with the Dark Forest's plans,* I realized before standing up. *Either way, I need to do what I can, and I'm going to find out what I can.*

Even despite my kits being in the middle of learning another battle

move, they all immediately noticed as I stood up in my spot. "Hey, where are you going?" Emberpaw called back to me from where she stood with Dustystorm.

"You're not staying?" Wrenpaw then asked, tilting his head.

"Are we too boring?" Lightningpaw added on, his meow only half-teasing.

I purred as I ran up and gave each of my kits a lick on the cheek. "Not in the slightest, my loves," I insisted to them. "I wish I could stay to see how amazingly you all will do, but I have some business to take care of back at camp. So you had better give Thornclaw and I every single detail once you get back!"

"Will do!" Wrenpaw exclaimed as he dipped his head to me.

I flashed my son a warm look. "Great," I purred before turning around and beginning to make my way out of the clearing, giving a wave of my tail to the three mentors as I did so. "I will see you all later!"

I then proceeded to pelt at full speed through the bright, sunlit forest. My fur flew back through the breeze, which felt very nice because of the warm weather. Honestly, besides the leaves being gone from the trees, and the water being frozen over, I actually really enjoyed the chilliness of leaf-bare. I didn't have the best fur for it, but it was an excuse to pull Thornclaw away from patrols, or vice versa, so that we could keep warm and cuddle in our nest.

But as much as I would have liked to continue to run like the wind, I was on a mission, and needed to get to camp as soon as possible.

And luckily enough, I arrived at the camp entrance after what only felt like a few heartbeats. I quickly crawled through the camp entrance, and once I was in the camp clearing, began to look for the dark ginger pelt of Squirrelflight.

As I scanned over the camp, I felt a twinge of extreme excitement as my eyes briefly fell on the nursery, where Brackenfur and Sorreltail were now settled in with their litter of two - Lilykit, a very, very

good name choice on their part, if you ask me; and Seedkit.

Sorreltail had actually given birth to them out into the forest, where she had gone to take a quick walk, being completely unaware that her kits were about to come.

But just after they had been born, they were taken to the safety of the nursery, and I had gone to visit them as soon as I was allowed. They were both so beautiful and perfect, and it was so thrilling to think that it six moons time, I'd be *training* one of them!

I pushed down temptation to visit them again and broke my gaze away from the nursery. I then clearly noticed Squirrelflight's dark-ginger fur near the elders den, where she was sharing tongues with Brambleclaw. I hated to cut off their time together, so I urgently but warily ran up to the two.

They both turned to me once I came into their view. Brambleclaw gave me a lash of his tail in greeting, while his mate exclaimed, "Hi, Lilypetal!"

"Hi! I'm sorry to interrupt," I meowed kindly in reply before giving Brambleclaw a humored, apologetic look, "But is it okay if I steal away Squirrelflight for just a bit?"

Squirrelflight purred with amusement and looked warmly back at her mate as Brambleclaw rolled his eyes with mock-annoyance. "Oh, I suppose you can," he muttered before giving Squirrelflight a farewell lick on the cheek. "I'm surprised that you all don't get enough talking in while you're in the warriors den."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I watched Squirrelflight pad up to stand next to me. "Nope! That's not nearly enough!" I teased sarcastically before giving the dark brown tabby a nod of gratitude. "But thanks, Brambleclaw! I'll see you later!"

Squirrelflight then gave Brambleclaw an affectionate flick on the ear before turning to me, her eyes eager and inquisitive. So, with that, I decided to lead her to the same place that she, Leafpool and I had spoken with each other the night that Hollyleaf had spilled the secret of her true parents to the Gathering. It was secluded, and it

would possibly cause some memories to re-emerge, as I would need Squirrelflight to do with this conversation.

I immediately settled down once we arrived, and watched patiently as Squirrelflight did the same. "Okay," she breathed as she sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws. "So, what's going on, Lilypetal?"

I took a deep breath and shyly looked down to the ground. This was probably going to be a tough conversation for Squirrelflight to have, but I knew that it would be of great help to me if she was willing to talk about it. "Well, if you don't mind... I wanted to ask you some questions."

Squirrelflight looked a bit surprised, blinking wide green eyes. "Questions?"

I gave the ginger she-cat a slow nod. "Yes, but if they're too touchy or weird, you most certainly don't have to answer them."

Squirrelflight's wide eyes then narrowed with interest and mischief. "Intriguing..." she murmured. She then scooted closer to me and gave me a joking hard stare. "Try me."

You're intrigued and eager now, but just you wait... I thought as I hesitated and tried to find my words. For a moment, I even wondered if I should bring this up to Squirrelflight. I mean, I had just decided to do this just moments ago out in the forest.

But I decided to stick with my gut, and I finally revealed my intentions with this talk after another deep breath. "Well... I wanted to ask about Ashfur."

At that name, Squirrelflight's green eyes immediately seemed to flash with fear, and it was a few moments before she actually spoke. To be honest, I had actually expected a stronger reaction, considering I was going to be asking her questions about a cat who wanted to intentionally bring her pain. "Ashfur..." she finally breathed as she seemed to be staring off at nothing. But just a heartbeat later, she closed her eyes and shook her head before meeting my gaze again. "Okay, go on..."

I looked warily back at the she-cat. "Okay, if you're sure..." I murmured, and after Squirrelflight further prompted me with a flick of her tail, I cut to the chase. "Well, before... before he threatened you, what was your relationship like? I mean, what was it like when you all were actually friends? How did that come about?"

Squirrelflight sniffed after processing my words. "I understand now why Brambleclaw couldn't be here for this conversation!" We shared a *mrrow* of laughter at that comment, and then Squirrelflight seemed to think about my question.

"But Great StarClan, that feels like so long ago..." she then muttered as her eyes grew dark with contemplation. She then nodded to herself and met my gaze again as I waited in extreme anticipation. "Well, we didn't really become close until Brambleclaw and I returned from the sun-drown place journey, and until we arrived to the lake territories."

She then paused to grasp at memories once again. "It had always seemed like Ashfur wanted to be closer with me," she eventually continued, "so when Brambleclaw and I got into a quarrel, I wasn't at all surprised when Ashfur immediately came to support me."

I slowly nodded as I listened to my friend's words. "I see..." *So Ashfur decided to worm his way in, huh?*

"And to be honest with you, the further that Brambleclaw and I seemed to be growing apart, the closer that Ashfur and I were becoming," Squirrelflight went on. "It was actually looking like we were on the way to becoming mates." She then rolled her eyes and snorted. "Well, at least, that's how he seemed to see it."

To be honest, I was trying with all of my might not to gag and vomit up the vole that I had eaten for lunch as I continued to listen to Squirrelflight. "And because Ashfur and I had been getting so close, he was completely thrown off when Brambleclaw and I reconciled and became mates," she was meowing as I pushed down my disgust.

I nodded, this time with much more understanding. "Ahhh..." I breathed before proceeding to let out a humored snort of contempt.

"And based on what I've seen... he didn't handle that well."

Squirrelflight sighed and shook her head slowly. "No, not at all..." she agreed. "I had been hoping that we'd still be able to be friends after that, but he immediately gave me the cold shoulder, and acted as hurt as if I had brutally killed his whole family."

Oh, the irony of that statement, I thought, my anger and grief over Ashfur's treachery threatening to well up inside of me once again, taking over the shock of what Squirrelflight had been telling me for just a moment.

"Wow... the earliest I've seen of that conflict was Ashfur trapping Leafpool's kits in the fire, I'd had no idea of everything before that!" I commented once I had composed myself, being truly in awe at what my friend was telling me. "So, he just instantly decided that he couldn't be around you anymore? It would hurt him too much?"

Squirrelflight shrugged. "Apparently. And beyond that, he was incredibly hostile to me and Brambleclaw, and even Leafpool's kits - who he knew to be mine at the time," Squirrelflight further explained as her green eyes seemed to fill with bitterness and anger. "He questioned Firestar in front of *everybody* when he chose Brambleclaw as deputy, and was harsh to Lionblaze while he was mentoring him."

Squirrelflight then seemed to need a moment to compose herself, her voice nearly having risen into a growl just before she cut herself off. I briefly touched my tail tip to her should as she began speaking again. "And beyond that... well, you most definitely know that story."

Oh yes, I do, I thought in exasperation. I then began to reflect further on everything I had just heard. *So... it seems that Ashfur's obsession with Squirrelflight, his hurt at her picking Brambleclaw over him really was the beginning of all of this. This hurt has been what has driven every single bad thing he has done.*

A shiver ran down my spine at this. Yes, I had always known that this was the case, but for some reason, hearing the deeper details somehow made Ashfur's intentions so much more ominous. *I've seen*

how love can make you crazy on several occasions - with my daughter, and even my mate. But my goodness, is this *the next level!*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts, letting out a sigh as I finally replied to Squirrelflight. "Yes, my meddling mouse-brained-self knows a heck of a lot!"

"Hey, it was for the best, right?" Squirrelflight asked lightheartedly. "We got that fox-heart out of ThunderClan, you chased him out for good, and when Goldenshine killed him... well..." The dark ginger she-cat then flashed me a sad, sympathetic look. "Let's just say that he's hopefully in the Dark Forest now, where he belongs."

I suddenly almost felt physically tired as I thought about Squirrelflight's words. *I would trade my moss nest for a nest of thorns, and trade all of the prey on the fresh-kill pile for frogs if it meant that the situation would be as simple as that...*

I was about to speak again, but cut myself off as I realized that Squirrelflight seemed to be pulled into her own thoughts once again. "But that was so long ago..." she recalled. After a moment, she then shook her head and gave me an inquiring look. "May I ask *you* a question?"

Oh, dear. "Sure, go ahead!" I meowed kindly to the she-cat despite how nervous I felt. *If she's going to ask what I think she is... I have no idea what I'm going to say.*

"As much as I'm happy to tell you all of that, why are you so curious all of the sudden? Ashfur was killed seasons ago... so what exactly has caused this to resurface?"

Annnnddd there it is.

Poor Squirrelflight had to spend many, many moments waiting in silence as I anxiously tried to decide what exactly to tell her, which I eventually decided was going to be... everything. The thought had occurred to me, and I suppose that now was finally my chance to tell Squirrelflight everything that had been going on - the part of the story of Ashfur that Squirrelflight herself couldn't tell.

After I took another moment to decide how to start, I let out a long sigh and looked into Squirrelflight's eyes with a calm, even hazel gaze. "Well, the thing is..." I began nervously. "It's not exactly something that has *resurfaced*. It has always been there."

From here, I proceeded to tell Squirrelflight one heck of a story - everything that I had experienced with Ashfur since his exile, which consisted of his real reason for wanting to kill Snowflight, for one. Every ThunderClan cat up until the present had simply believed that Ashfur had killed my dear daughter simply to scare them, not that it was an act of revenge. I then told her about Ashfur's manipulation of Swiftflight, and how he had attempted to harm my kits by leading them away from camp.

It felt like there had been a frog in my throat the entire time I was speaking, but I tried my hardest to persevere, as tough as the subject was. Squirrelflight looked more and more dismayed with every word that I said, and by the time I was done, the she-cat looked utterly horrified.

She was silent for what felt like moons. I was nearly startled when I finally heard her voice, even if it was barely above a whisper. "Oh my StarClan, Lilypetal..." she breathed, her eyes big green moons. "I don't even know what to say."

She then stood up. "Well, maybe I do," she meowed. "How about this - why did you hide this from me?"

I stood up with her. "Squirrelflight, the last thing that I wanted to do was throw you back into this - you had already dealt with enough."

"But what about *you*, Lilypetal?" my friend nearly growled. "That doesn't mean that you should be the one to take all of the blows!"

She then let out a hiss and whipped her head to the side as she shook it. "This... this is absolutely sick! I cannot believe that he would do this to you... to all of them! I..." She then paused as her eyes seemed to wash over with horror once again. "This is all my fault..."

I gasped, knowing that I immediately had to refute that foxdung. "Squirrelflight, you shut your mouth! That is not true at all," I demanded to her. "*You* didn't make me speak up at that Gathering. *You* didn't make me chase him out as an exile."

I then took a step closer to Squirrelflight and hardened my gaze. "I did it because *I* wanted to. I wanted to help you, and to help ThunderClan get rid of a dangerous cat."

I nearly took a step back as I met Squirrelflight's blaring green gaze again. "Oh, yeah?" she asked me in an ominously quiet voice. "And what has that cost you, Lilypetal?"

I shut my eyes for a moment, being taken aback by the very blunt question. "A lot..." I sighed.

"Exactly!" Squirrelflight exclaimed as she began to pace the area. "And you didn't even deserve any of it - Ashfur's grudge towards *me* was how this all started!"

"As true as that is, that doesn't imply that what Ashfur is doing to me is your fault, for StarClan's sake!" I insisted to her after I had pushed down my grief.

And seeing how upset my words had made Squirrelflight, causing her to blame herself for what I had endured, I knew that I had to say something to calm her down. "He may have brought me pain," I continued, watching as she continued to pace, "but that doesn't mean that I'm taking it without doing a thing."

Squirrelflight stopped in her pacing and looked back at me. "What do you mean?"

"I'm taking care of it, that's all that you need to know," I insisted as I padded up to her. The words weren't exactly a lie, as much as I was willing to lie to calm Squirrelflight down. Not at all, in fact, I actually felt a wave of determination as I said them. "Ashfur's horrible antics are coming to an end soon, I know it. I'm going to make sure of it."

Squirrelflight's eyes narrowed, and she turned to completely face

me again. "But... how in the name of StarClan can that be the case?" she questioned. "He's dead! What control do you have over him?"

You'd be surprised... I happen to have a bit at the moment. "You don't need to worry, Squirrelflight," I meowed simply to her, then attempting to lighten the mood. "And if you say that this is your fault one more time... I'm moving my nest in the warriors den away from you."

Although the ginger she-cat still looked dismayed and unsure, she managed to let out a little purr of amusement. "Hm, well, we wouldn't want that..."

"Definitely not," I purred before giving my friend a comforting lick on the ear. "Thank you so much for all that you told me, Squirrelflight. It was... *very* helpful." *Quite helpful, even if I don't know exactly what to do with it yet.*

Squirrelflight sighed as she looked fearfully back at me. "Okay... well, I'm glad," she murmured. She then took a step closer to me. "But Lily-"

I put my tail on her shoulder to cut off her words. "Squirrelflight, it's under control."

Unfortunately, Squirrelflight still seemed uncertain as she stood up. "Alright. As usual, I trust you," she murmured warily.

She then began to pad away, but glanced back at me as she walked. "How about you go to the fresh-kill pile, get yourself something to eat, and pick out something for me, too?" she asked. She then looked away again, her head hanging low. "I'll join you soon enough. Now... I just need to go and get some air."

I stared worriedly off at the she-cat as she continued to walk away. "Sure, Squirrelflight. Take your time," I insisted to her as I began to feel overwhelmed with guilt. *She still feels like this is her fault, and she'll believe that no matter how much I try to tell her otherwise.*

My ears then flicked with surprise as she paused and looked back at me again. For a bit, she didn't even speak, and simply stared

straight at me and shook her head slowly, her green eyes filled with awe. "Wow..." she breathed. "You are some cat, aren't you?"

Without even waiting for my reply, she turned and left through the shrubs we had entered.

I continued to look straight at the spot she had disappeared through, thinking about the praise she had just given me. At least, I assumed that it was praise. *Some cat?* I repeated in my mind. *Well, I suppose I am some cat.*

I then let out a sigh and began to exit the small clearing myself. *Some cat that now has a better idea of Ashfur's weaknesses...*

Chapter 15

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

The soon-to-be-setting sun was nearly blinding, even though the leaf-filled trees as I walked side by side with Dustystorm through the ThunderClan forest, our fur brushing as we both enjoyed the wonderful greenleaf weather.

The two of us had decided to go out for a quick walk while our apprentices were taking care of their duties in camp - Cherrypaw was (I hope) working on switching out moss in the warriors den, and poor Emberpaw was getting ticks off of Mousefur and Purdy with mouse bile.

So, Dustystorm and I had wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to spend some time alone. Along with that, I had really, really needed the time to clear my head. From Swiftflight still being blamed for doing nothing in the fox attack, to Sol, who had left ThunderClan, but still showed signs of being around, to the quarrel that I had had with Jayfeather a couple of moonhighs ago.

I had always known that I wouldn't take my insistence of watching over Snowstorm on my own very well, but he clearly was planning to hold a grudge for quite a while. I nearly felt like my fur was going to catch fire with each hard stare that he gave me whenever I was near him, and whenever we passed each other in camp, he'd do nothing but scoff and shake his head slowly.

Basically, our friendship was incredibly tense at the moment, and as right as the choice I had vocalized to him felt, I couldn't help but feel guilty seeing how it impacted Jayfeather. *I suppose that I shouldn't necessarily make choices for him... and I may end up needing his help again...*

I then shook my head quickly. *Goldenshine, stop it. You are going to do this on your own, and you're going to be fine. Jayfeather will*

appreciate this in the long run.

I then took a deep breath and turned my head, my heart warming as my eyes fell on the cat walking next to me. *Why am I worrying about that, when I should be focusing on this amazing cat beside me?*

Feeling a wave of affection, I bent my head and nuzzled it into Dustystorm's neck fur as a purr rumbled in my throat.

Dustystorm pressed back, and after a few heartbeats, I pulled away to find his pale blue eyes glittering. "What was that for?" he asked as he purred with amusement.

I flashed him an affectionate look and shrugged. "I decided that my head just really needed to stick to your neck, I guess."

Dustystorm shook his head slowly as his eyes continued to glow. "Yes, your head is weird like that," he continued to purr.

I then rolled my eyes and flicked my mate's ear with my tail. "And... well, I also suppose that it was because I think you're pretty cool," I teased. I then sighed and looked warmly back into Dustystorm's eyes. "Thanks for coming on this walk with me."

"Anytime, Goldenshine," the sandy gray tom meowed softly. My heart then began to beat faster as he bent his head forward and pressed his muzzle against mine. Another purr rose in my throat as I closed my eyes and took in his familiar, warm scent.

Just a moment later, I was surprised to see Dustystorm quickly pull away, his face screwed up in disgust. "Great StarClan!" he hissed as he closed his eyes and wrinkled his nose.

I flicked my ears with surprise. "Wow, ouch!" I exclaimed, wondering why my mate suddenly found my touch repulsive. "I mean, I understand that touching muzzles is a little sappy, but-"

"Not you!" Dustystorm quickly insisted, flashing me an apologetic look as he lashed his tail forward. "I just got a whiff of WindClan's scent markers. They must have freshened them pretty recently."

I gaped my mouth open, and I soon found myself making the same

face that Dustystorm had. "No kidding!" I replied, then beginning to pad away from the stream, remembering that Firestar had recently commanded his Clan to stay away from WindClan's borders, for whatever reason. He hadn't quite given us an explanation yet, which I had found to be very strange.

But I still found myself looking back towards the other Clan's border, feeling a weird pang of discomfort. "I... I didn't realize that we'd gotten so close to the border." I then slowly stopped in my tracks as I began to fall in my own thoughts.

I still vividly remembered the last time I had been in this very spot - Cherrypaw and Molepaw's ThunderClan territory tour, where we had happened to run into a WindClan patrol that'd had Breezepelt on it. I had wanted to consult my former mate about Swiftflight's strange behavior, Breezepelt being my absolute last resort.

But it surely had been one of the most unnerving, most unproductive conversations I'd ever had. I was still blown away to this day by the way that Breezepelt had behaved - lashing out at me for speaking the truth about our son, and acting like I was making a bigger deal out of the situation than it really was. Why the topic of Swiftflight was so touchy for him, I would probably never know.

Not only was the meeting frustrating, but it also marked the end of any civil relationship that Breezepelt and I had been able to have. I could most definitely live with that, but for Swiftflight's sake, it would have been nice for his own parents to be able to get along. But honestly... I think he can live with that, too.

As I fell deeper and deeper in my thoughts, I had barely been able to realize that I was still staring straight at WindClan's border as I did so. I slowly began to pull myself back into reality as I saw Dustystorm's sandy pelt emerge into my sight again, his eyes seemingly big with worry. "Goldenshine?"

I shook my head quickly to ensure that my mate would have my full attention. "Yes?"

I then watched nervously as he sat down beside me and followed my gaze towards WindClan territory. It was a few moments before

he spoke.

"What was your relationship like with Breezepelt?" he then finally asked, his voice low with hesitation. His gaze anxiously flicked towards me. "Did... did you love him?"

I let out a huff of frustration - frustration with myself, that I had clearly made it look like to Dustystorm that WindClan, and certain cats in WindClan, was still something that was on my mind frequently.

I pondered the question though, and planned on giving my mate an honest answer, as much as I hated the answer. "Yes, I did love him," I admitted with a sigh as I began to take myself back to my time as a new warrior, the time that I had secretly met with Breezepelt by the stream almost every night. "I know that I did, because feeling anything less than what I did surely wouldn't have brought me to practically lose my mind - meeting with a tom from another Clan, having his kits..."

I then had to shut my eyes as a truly horrible memory resurfaced. *Because originally, Swiftflight wasn't the only one. He sad siblings...* I thought with immense sadness, recalling the three precious kits I had lost in my kitting. But I pushed it all down so that I could continue with my words.

"But because of that, and what I've learned from it, I associate it with such a dark time," I eventually went on to Dustystorm. "I mean, I *lost* myself *completely*. I loved Breezepelt, but he didn't make me my best self."

I hated to see Dustystorm's eyes still clear with worry as I looked back at him. "Oh, yeah?" he murmured softly. He then began to shift his paws back and forth as he looked to the ground. "But... you really loved him, huh?"

I comfortingly wrapped my tail around my mate and lifted his head with a paw. I was glad to see his eyes warm as I met his gaze again. "Because I love you, I'll be honest and say that I did love him," I meowed softly. I then sighed and stared towards WindClan again. "But... looking back, I think that I was partly relived when Firestar

forced us apart. It gave me a reason to acknowledge how stupid I was being."

I then let out a snort and shook my head slowly. "Swiftflight is a reason that I am actually *thankful* for that stupidity, but beyond that, thinking about that time just leaves me upset and uneasy."

"But... you all were split up by force, right?" Dustystorm asked after a moment's thought. "Wouldn't..."

My mate then paused as he hesitated, clearly trying to find the right words. He then glanced back up at me. "Wouldn't there be some lingering feelings there?" The anxiety and jealousy was clear in Dustystorm's eyes, as much as I knew that he would hate to be feeling those two things.

I knew that I had to continue to be honest. "Well, there was for a little while, of course. But... they genuinely didn't last as long as I would have expected," I explained. And then thought back to my latest encounter once again, having to suppress a hiss. "And meeting with him recently to talk about Swiftflight further reminded me that he wasn't the right tom for me."

My eyes then slowly narrowed down into slits as I almost seemed to be making a realization out loud. "There... there was always such a darkness to him that I think I was unconsciously trying to ignore," I went on. "Even if Firestar hadn't caught us, I don't think that it would have lasted."

My heart then seemed to grow as I met Dustystorm's warming gaze once again. "And I'm very, very glad that it didn't," I whispered softly to him.

Dustystorm's eyes then seemed to wash over with relief. "Me too," he whispered back, giving me a quick lick on the cheek. "So, after you and Breezepelt parted ways, had you originally planned to take another mate in the future?"

I let out another snort in response. "Honestly, that was the last thing on my mind - between caring for Swiftflight, working with Mousewhisker to make sure that our Clanmates thought he was

Swiftflight's father, and trying to gain Firestar's trust again," I explained, shaking my head slowly as I could almost feel the amount of exhaustion I had endured during that time. "And even after Mousewhisker and I decided to tell the Clan that we weren't 'mates' anymore, I truthfully didn't think about finding love again. It wasn't my priority at all."

Yet another purr began to rumble in my throat as I stared back at Dustystorm's now shy, bashful gaze. "But then..." I meowed softly as I continued to purr. "This handsome, kind, absolutely adorable tom found his way to ThunderClan, and, well... I started to second-guess myself on that front."

"Oh, really? Who is this tom? He sounds absolutely delightful!" Dustystorm purred as he sat down. His teasing gaze then became timid once again. "He really made you change your mind?"

I sat down close to my mate. "Oh, yeah," I meowed, pressing my muzzle against Dustystorm's again. "He made it so incredibly easy."

After a few more heartbeats, I then pulled away from my mate's muzzle as an interesting thought crossed my mind. I looking mischievously and teasingly back at my mate as I asked, "So, handsome, kind, absolutely adorable tom - is there any cat that I need to be jealous of?"

I found myself almost immediately regretting the question, actually feeling a small pang of jealousy as I watched my mate hesitate, and his gaze grow sheepish - he clearly had someone in mind.

And sure enough, that was the case, and he told me so. "Well... yes," he admitted. "But Goldenshine, you don't need to worry." He then put the tip of his tail on my shoulder, and I met his teasing gaze. "She was a housecat - she's too far for me to even get to her!"

I let out a huff and rolled my eyes. "Wow, you are hilarious," I muttered sarcastically. I then processed the meaning behind Dustystorm's words and flashed him an uneasy glance. "So... a housecat, huh?"

"Yeah..." Dustystorm replied reluctantly as he nodded. "Her name

was Chloe."

"That's a truly disgusting name," I muttered.

Dustystorm then let out a purr of amusement as he nuzzled my cheek with his muzzle. "I figured you'd think so," he meowed before pulling away. "She lived a couple of houses down from me, and we'd meet every single night to take walks around the Twolegplace."

I narrowed my eyes and watched skeptically as Dustystorm continued with his story. "We had lots of fun before we decided to part ways," he went on. He then looked up towards the trees, and I found myself growing even more nervous. "Great StarClan, she was nice, calm, demure..."

I was now practically frozen in place, my unsheathed claws beginning to sink into the ground as I listened to Dustystorm list things off about his past love, but I tried my best to continue to give him the benefit of the doubt as she looked to me again. I nervously glanced back at him.

I was surprised to see that his eyes were teasing once again. "...and boring, and average, in the past..." he listed on, then pulling me closer to him with his tail as he licked my head. "And *not you* at all."

I pretended to be annoyed by Dustystorm stringing me along, rolling my eyes and beginning to slowly pad away from my mate. "I send her my apologies if she ever had to deal with this horrible teasing while you were with her."

Dustystorm quickly caught up to me. "I never loved her enough to give her the privilege of hearing it!"

After flashing my mate a look that feigned skepticism and annoyance, I rolled my eyes again and stepped over so that I was flanking him once again. I found that I trusted Dustystorm's words completely, and the fact that he had loved someone else before me didn't bother me at all. I had fully moved on from Breezepelt and had come to love Dustystorm with all of my heart, and it was clear that he had done the same on his end as well.

The two of us had only just begun to head back towards camp when we heard Firestar's yowl from up ahead. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

Dustystorm and I both stopped in our tracks and exchanged a confused glance. "Uh, oh," I murmured. "What could this be about?"

I then watched, feeling amused and even more confused, as Dustystorm crouched down and flashed me a mischievous look. "Let's see who can find out first!" he exclaimed before bolting forward and breaking into a run.

I let out a gasp. "Hey!" I called out, pelting forward after my mate. "That's not fair, you housecat-loving tease!"

The two of us were bursting with laughter as we then made a break for it towards camp. Although I was quick, managing to dodge every possible obstacle... so was Dustystorm, and beat me to camp with his head-start. But my heart welled up with affection as I arrived at the camp entrance to see that my mate hadn't gone inside, and was waiting for me by the gorse tunnel.

The two of us exchanged a loving glance before walking into camp together. Our Clanmates were already pretty well-gathered by the time that we came into view. We quickly padded up to where our apprentices, Cherrypaw and Emberpaw, were currently sitting and talking together. I settled down with my ginger apprentice, while Dustystorm sat on Emberpaw's other side.

I then began to scan the camp, and I felt a small wave of relief as I noticed that Swiftflight was padding into the clearing with Snowstorm by his side. They didn't sit with the big crowd of cats, but sat near the warriors den a few fox-lengths away. To be frank, I was impressed and quite proud to see that my son was making the effort to join in, even when so many of his Clanmates doubted him at the moment. *They shouldn't be... but they are!*

I then flicked my ears and began to twitch my whiskers, growing alert as I heard some very interesting words among the gathered ThunderClan cats.

"Did you hear that Cinderheart used to be Cinderpelt?"

"Yeah, Leafpool and Jayfeather knew all along!"

"I can't believe that Sorreltail didn't realize. She and Cinderpelt were good friends, right?"

"They do look a bit alike. But how weird that Cinderheart knows all about that medicine cat stuff!"

I was instantly shocked, a chill running down my spine as I realized that the word had gotten out about Cinderheart's true identity - something that Jayfeather had revealed to me moons ago.

I urgently looked around for the gray tabby tom, and found him in his usual spot just outside of the medicine den. His ears were perked up as he seemed to be listening to all of the buzz. He didn't seem to realize that I was looking back at him.

I then broke my gaze away from the medicine cat and let my eyes fall to the ground. *So, now all of ThunderClan knows that Cinderheart is Cinderpelt's reincarnation?* I reflected to myself. *I wonder what would happen if cats were to know about Snowstorm, too?* Yet another shiver ran down my back as I remembered that, now, that was all up to me.

I luckily wasn't able to delve deep into my nervous thoughts as Firestar began to speak. I forced myself to look up at the ThunderClan leader on the Highledge, who was standing side by side with Brambleclaw.

"I have grave news, and I've decided to share it with the Clan after discussing it with Brambleclaw and the senior warriors," the ginger tom began. He then scanned over his Clan for a few heartbeats before taking a deep breath, his green eyes darkening. "It seems that Sol has betrayed us; he's planning an attack with cats from WindClan."

What? No way! I let out a quiet gasp as I watched Mousefur get to her paws over by the elders den. "What?" the old she-cat exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you that cat was trouble?"

"I wish I could say that I was surprised!" Lilypetal then hissed just as many yowls of rage and shock began to rise among the crowd. Just a few tail-lengths from me, Mousewhisker's fur was bristled out as he sunk his claws into the ground.

"Traitor!" he growled. "Mange-pelt!"

I exchanged a half-amused, half-uneased glance with Dustystorm. I think that the both of us were quite shocked by our friend's unusually angry behavior.

Firestar spoke out again once the noise had died down. "I can't say that I'm surprised to hear what Sol is up to," he meowed, probably reflecting what almost every cat was thinking. "It explains why he hasn't shown himself here in the hollow for the last few sunrises."

I saw my father, Thornclaw, shaking his head slowly just a little ways away. "He'd better stay away if he knows what's good for him."

"We have to attack WindClan now!" Cloudtail called out, shouldering his way through his Clanmates towards the Highledge.

Many cats began to yowl out in agreement. But honestly, I barely heard it. Something else was beginning to cross my mind. Something good that was actually coming out of Firestar's announcement.

The ThunderClan leader then raised his tail for silence. "We are not at war with WindClan yet," he insisted sharply. "We have no way of knowing whether Onestar is aware of this, or whether Sol is making plans with a few cats he has befriended. And we're not going to approach Onestar about it, because we don't want to give him the idea of attacking."

"Then what are we going to do?" Dustpelt called out in reply. "We can't just sit here and wait!"

"Of course not," Firestar reassured the tabby warrior. "We'll plan for a battle with the whole of WindClan, but it might not come to that." Firestar then lifted his head and let out a sigh. "We'll wait for

WindClan to come to us, because we're strongest in our own territory. We all know that WindClan doesn't like fighting among trees."

"That's right!" I heard Birchfall exclaim. "We can climb trees and drop on their heads, like we did when we fought in ShadowClan."

"And ambush them from the undergrowth," Sandstorm added on. "WindClan cats are used to being able to see a long way in all directions."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Firestar dipping his head. "Good suggestions," he murmured.

"Wait a moment, everybody!"

I quickly whipped my head around at the new voice, and was excited and relieved to see that it appeared to have been Snowstorm that had spoken. I already knew that she was going to say exactly what I had been thinking, and what I had been waiting for the opportunity to say amidst the battle-planning.

Once Snowstorm saw that she had many eyes on her, she took a step forward. "Don't you all realize what this means?" she meowed clearly. She then glanced back at Swiftflight, whose gray-blue eyes were currently wide with alarm. "If Sol is really this horrible traitor-" She then nodded to Mousewhisker. "-a mange-pelt, would he really take the time to help out with a fox attack?"

"Exactly." The cats in the clearing fell completely silent as I ran up to stand next to Snowstorm. "Sol lying now sounds like a more likely story, doesn't it?"

I then watched anxiously as cats began to murmur and whisper as they flashed skeptical, wide-eyed glances towards Swiftflight.

Blossomfall's was the first clear voice I could hear. "Wait... so Sol lied?" she queried. "To all of us?"

"But... Sol seemed to have such an elaborate story..."

I turned to Hazeltail as she spoke and gave her an inquiring, hard

look. "Who ever said that Swiftflight didn't?"

And with this question I had laid out, I could be certain that all eyes had gone to Swiftflight. I looked back at my son to see that he looked utterly daunted by the attention. He looked fearfully back at me for a single heartbeat before taking a deep breath and stepping forward.

"Rosepetal, Goldenshine, and I had thought that we'd chased off the fox, and we were returning to Cherrypaw and Molepaw's hiding spot when I heard Cherrypaw's yowl," my son began, glancing worriedly towards my apprentice with his last few words. After a moment, he then looked back at the crowd before him. "I ran ahead as fast as I could, and burst into the training hollow to see the fox creeping up to the bush that the apprentices were hiding in." He then closed his eyes and began to shake his head slowly. "I didn't even give it a second thought... I just leapt on it."

I stepped over slightly so that I was standing right next to Swiftflight. I stared at him, my heart welling up with love and pride. "And that's when I caught up to him, and found you fighting that fox like the most noble, fierce warrior."

Swiftflight briefly returned the look. "She asked me if I was crazy... and I said 'maybe'."

I felt another wave of relief as many cats purred with amusement at that comment, as if they were actually enticed by this story.

"And then I chased it off into the forest, I called it a worthless lump of fur, and I immediately ran to the bushes to tell Cherrypaw and Molepaw that it was okay for them to come out," Swiftflight went on.

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as I watched Cherrypaw run up to us. "He did!" the younger she-cat exclaimed. She then sat down on Swiftflight's other side. "As soon as Molepaw and I heard the fox's pawsteps getting quieter, Swiftflight had gotten to the bush and told us that it was all clear."

She then took a step forward, her gaze hardening as she looked

back at her Clanmates. "Would he have been so quick to do that if he had simply been watching from far away?" she pressed. "How would he know that it was safe unless he was the one to *make* things safe?"

The murmurs in the clearing further rose, and as I scanned around, I nearly wanted to let out a yowl of triumph as I caught the many sympathetic glances being shot my son's way. Poppyfrost and Berrynose looked completely shocked - one, probably because their daughter was sticking up for a cat that they had persistently denied would save their kits; and two, maybe because of the truth that was being revealed.

The cats who had stuck up for Swiftflight from the beginning, like Lilypetal, Thornclaw, and Foxleap, seemed to all be beaming with satisfaction.

And so was I. My son was finally getting the recognition, and dare I say, *redemption* that he deserved. *Thank freaking StarClan.*

I then clearly heard Rosepetal's voice as the hubbub began to die down. "Swiftflight, if this is true," the dark cream she-cat began, "why didn't you give your side of the story before? Why weren't you scolding us for believing Sol's lies?"

Beside me, my son simply shrugged as he let out a sigh. "You all had the right to your opinions," he admitted, his eyes solemn. "I couldn't make cats feel badly for something that they're entitled to." He then snorted and muttered more quietly, "Especially when the original lie actually seemed believable..."

Cats began to nod, their eyes glowing with admiration and thoughtfulness as they looked back at Swiftflight. I then watched as Toadstep took a step forward. "So... you decided to take the blame?"

As Swiftflight nodded back to his fellow young warrior, I took another glance over at Poppyfrost, who was now hissing with anger. And honestly, I had never been so happy to see a cat angry.

"I can't believe this!" the tortoiseshell she-cat growled. "That flea-pelt *lied* about saving our kits!"

I tilted my head back at my Clanmate. *Are you surprised? You were the one who gave Sol the opportunity to lie in the first place!* I thought, but didn't dare say out loud.

"How dare he betray us!" Berrynose then scoffed. "I'll claw his fur off the next time I see him."

"I knew that we shouldn't have trusted him again," Graystripe then meowed from his spot, "and I knew that he was surely lying about the fox story." He then nodded to Swiftflight, his demeanor proud. "He's treacherous through and through. Swiftflight was the real hero of that day."

I then watched, emotion practically rising in my throat as my son dipped his head bashfully, growing shy as many cats, lots of them being the ones who had originally doubted him, giving him praise and apologies. To my dismay though, Poppyfrost, for some reason, didn't look satisfied as she stared back at Swiftflight. I didn't know why, and all I knew was that I didn't like it.

My eyes then flew to the Highledge as Brambleclaw stood and padded up to its edge. "We need extra border patrols," he called out as he looked down at the cats in the clearing. "Sandstorm, will you lead one with Cloudtail, Nightwing and Hazeltail? Graystripe, you lead the other. Spiderleg, Lilypetal and Bumblestripe, go with him. And all of the hunting patrols need to stay away from the WindClan border. We don't want to look for trouble, so no more washing your paws in the stream!"

"As if we would!" I heard Dovewing call out.

I then watched as Brambleclaw jumped down from the Highledge. "Dustpelt and Brackenfur, I want you to work out a way to block off the entrance to the tunnels nearest to camp. We have to stop WindClan from attacking us in the heart of our territory."

"Don't block all of them!"

I turned, slightly startled, to see that Hollyleaf had sprung up from her spot. At first, I wondered what in the name of StarClan had brought her to say that, but just a moment later, I realized that I

had the exact frame of reference that the fluffy black she-cat did. We both had spent nearly a whole night in those tunnels trying to find a means of escape until a patrol had come to save us. In that time, we had gotten to know all of its different paths and passages very well.

I agree, blocking all of the passages might not be the best idea.
"Hollyleaf is right!" I meowed, walking quickly up to the Clan deputy. "It would be better that we keep the WindClan cats contained in a small area when they do attack."

Hollyleaf flashed me a grateful, knowing look. "There are tunnels at the edge of our territory that we should block off first, to stop the WindClan cats from surrounding us."

Dustpelt gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "There's sense in that."

"What's the best way to block the openings?" Brackenfur then asked as he walked up to Brambleclaw's side.

I took a moment to contemplate the golden brown tabby tom's words, and exchanged another glance with Hollyleaf. "Use stones to shut out the light," I answered my kin. "Sticks would let the light though, and so cats will try to get out that way."

Hollyleaf gave a nod in agreement. "If you use stones, they'll just think it's a dead end," she explained.

In front of us, Brambleclaw was nodding in understanding. "I see..." he murmured. He then turned to where Hollyleaf and I were standing. "Hollyleaf and Goldenshine, will you train us in fighting skills suitable for the tunnels, in case we have to take the battle underground?"

I couldn't help but let out an excited, surprised gasp. "Is that even a question?" I practically squealed. "Yes!"

"And that's a yes for me, too. Of course we will," Hollyleaf answered the deputy after she flashed me an amused glance.

"Great. You all will be of great help," Brambleclaw meowed as he sighed with relief. He then turned towards the clearing and seemed

to be scanning his gaze over the crowd of cats. "Dovewing, Ivypool, Brackenfur, Brightheart, Thornclaw, and Toadstep - go with Goldenshine and Hollyleaf to begin training."

I continued to grow more ecstatic - so excited about what my experience in the tunnels so many seasons ago had allowed me to do - but simultaneously more nervous as I watched the cats that Brambleclaw had called began to assemble. For a moment, all of my nerves seemed to fly away as I locked gazes with Thornclaw for just a moment, his pale blue eyes gleaming with happiness for me.

I gave him a small nod, my gaze warm, before taking a deep breath and giving Hollyleaf a light nudge.

Hollyleaf gave me a curt nod. "Yes, let's go." She then whipped herself around and began to head towards the gorse tunnel. "Listen to everything that Goldenshine and I tell you," she then called out to the patrol behind her, "because it could save your life."

I felt a small pang of fear at my friend's words, but began to follow behind Hollyleaf soon after. As I quickly ran up to catch up to the black she-cat, I could almost sense the tension and anger in the air as I passed by Jayfeather, who was giving me his usual hard stare.

I stopped in my tracks and shot him a glare, wondering if he'd be able to tell, despite him not being able to see. "What?" I asked sharply.

"Nothing," the medicine cat muttered. I then rolled my eyes as he let out a contemptuous snort, and his gaze darkened. "It just seems like you have a lot on your paws at the moment..."

I narrowed my eyes back at him. "Yes, and?"

Jayfeather stood up. "But I'm not insisting that you stop overseeing a cat's spirit, am I?" he pressed, his voice nearly rising up into a bitter growl.

I let out an exasperated huff. "That hardly applies to me, Jayfeather," I spit back at him. "I don't even begin to scratch the surface compared to you. You should know that more than me!"

I then glanced back at Hollyleaf leading our group, and then briefly looked back to Jayfeather. "I've got to go."

I didn't even wait for Jayfeather's reply, not allowing him to possibly argue, as I turned around to follow Hollyleaf once again. But the further that I got from the medicine cat, the stronger that my reluctance and regret seemed to grow as I sensed his blind gaze still burning into me.

Chapter 16

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

My eyes actually felt a bit strained as I tried my best to watch the mock-fight happening in front of me through the darkness of ThunderClan's tunnels. I could just barely see Toadstep and Dovewing in their combat, even just a few tail-lengths in front of me.

Goldenshine was currently watching them, her gray gaze locked on their two pelts as if she was out in broad daylight. She would shout out a tip to the two younger cats every few heartbeats, and even despite her having taken several groups of cats down into the tunnels for training up until now, she seemed to be handling each of them with the same amount of patience.

I had been chosen to be in her tunnel-training group for the day, along with Dovewing, Ivypool, and Toadstep. And I couldn't help but feel excited... and a bit nervous to know that Cherrypaw had also come along with our group. Goldenshine had made the point to her apprentice that it was likely that she wouldn't be fighting, but that she might as well see what the older warriors were learning. Which, I'll admit, was a *lot*. It had definitely felt like a very long day.

Thus far, we had already learned how to navigate through the tunnels, work on training our eyes to see through complete darkness, and how to fight despite being in quite a constricted, confined area.

At the moment, Dovewing and Toadstep seemed to be doing a great job with the latter lesson, fighting as confidently as they would be if

they were outside. I exchanged an impressed glance with Ivypool, and then glanced over just in time to see my mother standing up, her golden tabby brown head nodding with approval.

She then raised her tail as a signal for the two young warriors to stop. "Alright, you two. That's good," she meowed, her voice echoing through the tunnels. "Really good, in fact. You all seem to be well-acquainted with these circumstances already!"

I then found myself having to hold back a purr of amusement as my mother began to excitedly trot around the area. "But remember that you can use the lack of space to your advantage, too!" she went on. "As Hollyleaf demonstrated earlier, cornering your opponent in here would be as easy as catching a crippled piece of prey!"

I nodded in understanding, feeling increasingly proud and impressed to see all that Goldenshine seemed to know about these tunnels. Well, I mean, *obviously* she would, but I still felt immense pride seeing all of the knowledge that *only* my mother, along with Hollyleaf, seemed to carry. *I'd only expect so much from her!*

"Gee, this sure seems like it's going to be a battle to remember..." Cherrypaw then mewed, and I turned see that she was staring up at the tunnel's roof in awe. "I wish that Firestar was letting Molepaw, Wrenpaw, Emberpaw, Lightningpaw and I fight in it!"

As I felt a pang of sympathy for the ginger she-cat, Goldenshine padded up to Cherrypaw and gave her a light nudge. "Who says that guarding the camp is any less important?" she meowed encouragingly to her apprentice. "And anyway, you'll need to be on call in case we need back-up down here!"

Cherrypaw's amber eyes immediately lit up with her mentor's words. "That's true! We'll be ready!" she exclaimed. She then shifted her gaze over to me and shrugged as I let out a purr of amusement at her charming enthusiasm. "But... this still looks very fun, though!"

I nodded and let out another purr, returning the warm, amused look that Cherrypaw was giving me. Unfortunately, I had to force my gaze away from the she-cat quickly as I noticed Goldenshine

nodding in my direction.

"Well then, you'll surely enjoy getting to see more practice!" my mother teased to Cherrypaw before turning to face where Ivypool and I were sitting. "Okay - Swiftflight and Ivypool - it's time for you all to have a go." I was then surprised to see her sniff and flash an apologetic glance towards Ivypool, and then to me. "Swiftflight, I'll admit that you definitely have a bit of an advantage with that nearly black pelt of yours."

Ivypool let out a huff and padded around to stand in front of me as I let out a satisfied grunt. "You'll practically be invisible!" she jokingly scoffed. "No fair!"

I backed up a few pawsteps, quickly checked how much space I had, and then slowly crouched down. "Oh, please!" I meowed mockingly, my eyes narrowing. "My pelt color isn't going to be the reason why you're *easily* going down!" *Although, Goldenshine is definitely right. It'll be of great use in this darkness!*

Ivypool crouched down as well, letting out an amused snort. "Oh, yeah?" she questioned sharply just before letting out a yowl of determination and leaping forward towards me.

Luckily, I was able to think fast and dodge the silver she-cat's leap, causing her to nearly crash head-first into the cave wall behind her. I then watched, bracing myself, as she swiftly caught herself, veered back around, and then leaped back at me, her paws hitting my side.

She then managed to pin me down, my back being pressed into the cold, hard ground. Making sure that she had at least a bit of a grip on me, I used my strength to roll over on my side and hoped that the force would cause Ivypool to lose that grip.

I felt a twinge of gratification as I was released from her paws. I immediately leaped back up onto all fours and, as quickly as I could, attempted to advance on my fellow warrior and corner her, just had Goldenshine had advised us earlier.

As Ivypool's back actually touched the cave wall, her dark blue eyes seemed to flash with panic for just a moment.

But then, just a moment later, I was startled as Ivypool let out a hiss and swiped a sheathed paw across my face, completely taking me by surprise. And unfortunately, Ivypool used this to her advantage, and took the opportunity to leap on me again, with more force this time.

As she forced me against the stone floor once again, I found that I suddenly felt a rush of determination. I could almost feel the triumph exuberating from Ivypool already, *but she had better know that I'm not going to give up so easily!*

I managed to get a forepaw free of Ivypool's grip. Then, without thinking, I swiped it across the silver-and-white tabby she-cat's face.

But immediately, I felt my heart nearly stop as I quickly realized that my claws had been unsheathed.

Holy foxdung, holy foxdung... I practically felt numb with horror as Ivypool let out a hiss and shut her eyes. "Oh my StarClan..." I breathed as I watched the she-cat slowly back off of me. "Ivypool, I-"

Dovewing cut off my words as she urgently ran up to face her sister. "Ivypool!" she exclaimed, her voice full of fear. "Are you okay?"

Toadstep, who had also watched the whole scene unfold, slowly turned to me from where he had been staring wide-eyed at Ivypool. "Did you scratch her with your claws *unsheathed?*"

I found myself instantly taking a step back in my alarm and panic. "I-I didn't mean to!" I stammered. As I thought of ways I could explain myself, my heart pounding like it never had before, I almost felt as if I was being brought back to a few moons ago - when Ashfur had consistently encouraged me to be as rough as I could when fighting Snowstorm in our mock-fight, resulting in her needing to go to the medicine, and the beginnings of my own Clan questioning my morals.

But in a way, this felt much worse, as no cat had *forced* me to do this.

"You didn't *mean* to?" the black-and-white tom pressed in response to my broken words, his voice nearly rising into a growl. "I'd love to hear you say that when you end up killing a cat!"

My distress then seemed to disappear with Toadstep's harsh words, and was replaced with hurt and anger, as Toadstep seemed to be implying that I would do such a thing. "What?!" I hissed back at him, my fur beginning to bristle. "How *dare* you-"

"You all, hush! I'm fine," Ivypool then called out over my meow. I whipped my head towards her and found that she was touching a single paw to her face. "It didn't even draw blood."

I let out a long sigh of relief. *Thank StarClan. I can't even begin to figure out how I'd live with myself if I hurt yet* another *Clanmate in battle training...*

Dovewing, who was flanking Ivypool, still didn't look reassured, to my dismay. "That shouldn't matter!" she insisted, flashing a brief cross glance towards me. "Swiftflight is still-"

"Swiftflight was obviously just getting into the fight, as he should be!" Ivypool demanded, turning on her sister.

Toadstep let out a contemptuous snort. "With his *Clanmate?*"

I caught Ivypool giving the warrior a sharp nod before I closed my eyes, having to calm myself down with all of this chaos I had caused. "Sure!" the tabby she-cat replied. "I had to keep my claws from sliding out a few times, myself!"

"Oh, what a load of-"

My eyes then quickly flew back open as I heard Cherrypaw speak. "Toadstep!" the ginger she-cat exclaimed, standing up and giving the tom a hard stare. "It clearly was an accident. Let's just drop it!"

My heart managed to warm just a bit at the sight of the she-cat standing up for me. *And she always does...* I thought fondly as I looked back at Cherrypaw, who had spoken up without hesitation. *I can always count on her, can't I?*

My fur was practically beginning to tingle, but not with fear this time, as Goldenshine stood up as well, glaring at Dovewing and Toadstep. "Exactly what I was about to say," my mother meowed sharply before looking over at me, her gaze still sharp, but even. "Yes, claws must be sheathed in a practice-fight, but my son will hopefully remember that for next time. Let's just be glad that Ivypool isn't hurt."

But the fact that she isn't hurt doesn't even matter! That doesn't mean that what I did suddenly doesn't exist, I told myself worriedly as the golden brown tabby she-cat then padded up towards me and gave a nod to Ivypool. "Otherwise, it was really, really great! Great use of the space," my mother praised to us. She then let out a purr of amusement as she looked at the two of us back and forth. "It's a good thing that the two of your aren't going to be against each *other* in this battle - you two are both too agile and clever for your own good!"

And I'm too aggressive and violent for my own good, all thanks to... I trailed off of my own thoughts as I ruthlessly tried to push down guilt.

But I was sure that I wasn't hiding it well as I gave Goldenshine a small nod. "Thank you," I attempted to meow evenly before hesitantly turning to look towards Toadstep and Dovewing. "Having my claws out like that really was an accident," I insisted to them.

I then looked to Ivypool and nervously padded up to her. "I'm really sorry," I murmured to the she-cat. "Are you sure that I didn't hurt you?"

To my relief, Ivypool immediately gave me a nod and flicked one of my ears with her tail. "I'm sure," she replied warmly. Her eyes then seemed to glint with humor as she meowed, "Hm, maybe you just overestimate your own strength."

As I let out a snort, Ivypool then shot a glare towards Toadstep and Dovewing. "These two clearly overestimate your thirst for blood."

Dovewing sighed and rolled her eyes in response to her sister's words. "Well, I don't know what else to think!" she complained.

"Swiftflight-"

Ivypool hardened her stare as she looked back at Dovewing. "-isn't like that," she muttered, cutting the gray she-cat's meow off. She then slowly turned her head to look back at me, her gaze warm and certain. "I know that he isn't."

I stared back at the she-cat and returned her friendly gaze, my heart filling up with so much relief and platonic affection. *Ivypool would be a great companion to always have by my side,* I realized as I gave her a light nudge as a gesture of gratitude. *I mean, that's what I've wanted since I was a young apprentice. But now I know that that doesn't necessarily have to be as mates anymore.*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts as I saw my mother stand up. I looked back in her direction and felt a twinge of confusion as I noticed that Cherrypaw seemed to be staring back at me, her amber gaze contemplative and solemn. She seemed to snap out of it as soon as our gazes locked, and she flashed me a shy, nervous look before turning her head away.

Hm... I narrowed my eyes, recognizing that very look on her face - *the one that shows that something is clearly bothering her, but she is trying her best not to show it.* I very well knew the last time I had seen it, and it was in a situation somewhat similar to this one... *with similar cats involved...*

But before I could give Cherrypaw's gesture one more thought, Goldenshine finally replied to Ivypool's words. "True words, Ivypool," my mother meowed warmly before letting out a sigh. "Alright, really, really great session, you all! I think it's about time we called it a day."

I then watched as she glanced around, likely taking a quick glance at Hollyleaf's group of cats that were training some fox-lengths away. She then turned around to nod to her apprentice. "Cherrypaw, do you mind checking in with Hollyleaf and letting her know that we're ready to go?"

I looked to the ginger she-cat to find her shaking her head quickly, as if she had just pulled herself out of a gaze. "Hm?"

"Could you check in with Hollyleaf and tell her that we're all done?" Goldenshine repeated, her gray eyes flashing with concern for just a moment.

Cherrypaw blinked and shook her head quickly. "Oh, right! I'm so sorry!" the she-cat meowed, her eyes wide with guilt as she began to trot away. "I'm on it!"

I continued to be filled with concern for my friend as Goldenshine watched her walk off into the darkness. After a few heartbeats, she then beckoned our group with her tail and began to lead us out of the cave.

Just a moment later, I could barely see that black fluffy pelt of Hollyleaf running up to join my mother with her group just behind her. The two she-cats walked just next to each other as they led all of the convened cats through the tunnels. They seemed to be exchanging excited words about the training sessions that they had just led.

They eventually led us to a tunnel passage that required us to go in one at a time. I took a step back and lashed my tail, allowing Ivypool to pass first. I then looked to my other side to see Toadstep and Dovewing.

For a moment, I felt another twinge of fear. Because, as far as I knew, they still saw me as a vicious warrior who had intentionally hurt a Clanmate. But nevertheless, I stayed in place and lashed my tail forward again, allowing them to go in front of me.

Dovewing gave me an uncertain look, and she began to do as I had told her before coming to a slow stop. She took a pawstep back, and I then met her regretful green gaze. "Hey, Swiftflight... I'm..." She then let her head hang low. "I'm sorry about what I said. You fought really well."

I briefly touched the tip of my tail to the she-cat's shoulder as I shook my head. "Don't worry about it," I reassured her. I then nodded to Toadstep, whose gaze was also apologetic, but he was clearly more hesitant to speak out loud. "Both of you."

I then let out a snort as I began to pad behind them. "Clearly my claws had a mind of their own today."

Toadstep looked back at me, his gaze now warm. "Hey, when we fight with WindClan, it'll be helpful, I guess!" he replied cheerfully. "I'll admit, I can't wait to sink my claws into some rabbit-stinking fur! And to use everything that Goldenshine taught us today!"

"Oh, yeah!" Dovewing agreed excitedly. "WindClan won't know what hit them!"

I then couldn't help but purr with amusement as Toadstep burst from the tunnel and out into the open in front of me. His head was held high, his fur was bristled out, and his tail was lashing eagerly back and forth. "Let them come!" he called out into the forest. "We are ready!"

I actually managed to feel a rush of excitement with the warrior's words. *We are ready.*

But I also still felt an almost painful, regretful tug inside because of the incident that had just occurred. I was horrified, guilty, and embarrassed, to give a few words. Yes, the fox fiasco had definitely helped my Clanmates to see that I was more than just a hostile, closed-off young cat, but in my mind, I saw that all going away with this incident.

And what was worse, was that Dovewing and Toadstep both had been so quick to think the worst of me, not even bothering to assume that it had been an accident.

And as much as that hurt, I knew that I needed to get used to it. I may have done one good deed, but every cat knows that one piece of prey definitely doesn't fill up the fresh-kill pile. *You knew that this was going to take time, Swiftflight*, I said to myself as I walked through the bright forest. *The end of this tunnel may seem far, but it's there.*

At least feeling a bit reassured, I began to scan my eyes around the area to see what cats were around me. I glanced over my shoulder, and felt my heart lift as I saw Cherrypaw just a few fox-lengths

behind me. She was currently speaking to Lightningpaw, who had also gotten to watch the training sessions in the tunnels while his mentor, Nightwing, had also been there.

As soon as my eyes fell on the ginger she-cat, I found myself slowing my pace and trailing back, hoping that it would result in me walking right next to her. Just seeing her ginger pelt made me feel even better about the incident in the tunnel, but simultaneously I felt a bit nervous as something occurred to me. *Cherrypaw stood up for me... but that doesn't necessarily mean that she wasn't upset with me like Dovewing and Toadstep were,* I realized fearfully. *Oh my StarClan, that would be absolutely awful...*

But I tried to push this fear down as I noticed that Cherrypaw had noticed me in front of her. She gave a nod in farewell to Lightningpaw before quickly trotting up to meet me. "Hi, Swiftflight," she purred. Her tone had been kind and sweet, as it usually was, to my relief. "So, how do you feel after that training session?" She then lightly nudged me with her shoulder and raised a single eyebrow at me. "Ready for a battle?"

I purred with amusement at the she-cat's teasing. "Honestly, I don't know if I could ever completely get used to fighting in complete darkness, but I'll get the hang of it," I answered my friend, my head then hanging low as I was overwhelmed with another wave of guilt. "I just... I just hate that I took it a little too far with Ivypool." I then looked away from Cherrypaw, almost fearing to hear what she would have to say next.

So, I was happy to feel the she-cat's tail brush against my shoulder just a heartbeat later. "Aw, Swiftflight, don't worry about that!" she reassured me as she tried to meet my gaze. "It was an accident - you shouldn't feel badly at all. Just the fact that you *realize* that you made a mistake is all that matters, and you clearly have."

I then found myself actually having to suppress a purr as I felt Cherrypaw run her tail along my flank. I looked back at her to meet her warm, sympathetic amber eyes. "It really is okay, Swiftflight," she then meowed more gently. "Don't worry about it."

I immediately found that I was very warmed, and truly comforted

by Cherrypaw's words, and my heart seemed to beat faster and faster the longer that I returned her gaze. "Thank you, Cherrypaw. I'll try not to. Great StarClan, you always seem to have the right thing to say to me," I murmured, speaking my thoughts out loud. I then let out a purr of amusement. "I wish that you could be on call for me whenever I need some great advice or wise words." *You always seem to say it best...*

Cherrypaw also purred with amusement. "Aw, really?" she questioned. She then lowered her head shyly, and I almost wished that I could tell her out loud how adorable she looked in her bashfulness. "Thank you, Swiftflight. You're really sweet."

I finally let the purr release that had been rising in my throat, and I couldn't help but reach over and touch my nose to the ginger she-cat's ear. "Great StarClan, you're one to talk," I replied affectionately. I then pulled away and flashed her a humored look. "I might actually need you if we end up fighting WindClan in those tunnels. You don't even have to fight - just stand off to the side and shout encouraging words at me!"

Cherrypaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Oh, come on! You won't need that at all," she reassured me. "You're going to do just fine fighting in the tunnels."

I was then immensely confused and concerned to see Cherrypaw's gaze darken. "I was really, really impressed when I was watching you practice with Ivypool..." she then murmured after a few heartbeats. She then quickly looked away from me, but I had briefly caught her amber eyes flashing with panic. "You... you two seem to have a really good rhythm."

It only took me a moment to realize what my friend was getting at. "Well, sure. We did train as apprentices together for a few moons," I answered Cherrypaw, feeling like I immediately had to explain myself. "And we're good friends too, so I suppose that we ought to be able to fight well together."

"Yeah, you all definitely seem close," Cherrypaw replied. She then seemed to hesitate, and she flicked her nervous gaze towards me for just a single heartbeat before looking to the ground. "You... you've

always seemed to have liked her a lot."

Although I had already seen it coming, I found that I was shocked by this comment. And, for some reason, I felt utterly panicked and mortified that Cherrypaw was under this assumption that I had these strong feelings for Ivypool.

And yet, Cherrypaw wasn't wrong, at least in some aspects. And because I cared for her, I wanted to be honest with her. "Yes, I did," I sighed, shrugging. *Well... at least I thought that I did.*

I stared back at Cherrypaw to see that she was clearly trying to hold back panic, her eyes filled with uneasiness and disappointment for a brief moment. "Really?" she asked softly. "Do you still?"

Looking into her big amber eyes, I felt my nerves disappearing for a moment and giving me the courage to give her my true answer. "No, Cherrypaw," I replied to her softly as I touched my nose to her ear. "I don't at all."

I then pulled away, my heart beginning to pound all over again as I met Cherrypaw's surprised, but bright and delighted gaze. Our muzzles were just a mouse-length away from each other's, and I shocked myself as I took another step to the side, closer to the she-cat, when suddenly the ginger she-cat broke her gaze from me.

Trying to push down my disappointment, I followed Cherrypaw's gaze to see that Poppyfrost was padding up to the two of us. "There you are, Cherrypaw!" the tortoiseshell she-cat exclaimed before flicking her head forward and beckoning her daughter with her tail. "Come on."

"Come on?" Cherrypaw repeated confusedly, her eyes narrowing. "Where?"

Poppyfrost seemed to be holding back frustration as she walked up to Cherrypaw. "Berrynose and I are walking a little bit ahead of you," she explained. "He wanted me to come and get you so that you could tell us all about what you learned in the tunnels."

"Oh, okay!" Cherrypaw replied before flashing me a look. She then

looked back to her mother. "But could it wait until we all get back to camp? I'm talking to Swiftflight right now!"

Poppyfrost's eyes narrowed. "I know," she muttered. "You've been talking to him long enough. Now you should come and speak with your father."

Cherrypaw immediately seemed ready to protest. "But-"

"Cherrypaw," Poppyfrost nearly hissed. "Don't make me ask twice."

I then watched as Cherrypaw's eyes flashed with alarm. She glanced at me once again before sighing and lashing her tail at Poppyfrost. "Go on," she sighed, clearly giving in. "I'm right behind you."

Poppyfrost's tone really seemed to have intimidated Cherrypaw, as she then padded ahead with her without saying anything else to me. I had to watch her be taken away by her mother once again, but this time, a chill ran down my spine as I pictured Poppyfrost's glare - the one that she had been shooting at me continuously as she urged Cherrypaw to walk with her.

Great StarClan, was that queen confusing me more and more with each time I interacted with her. Just moments after Poppyfrost and Cherrypaw had disappeared from my sight, I had realized something *quite* strange...

Poppyfrost had seemed to want to give off the impression that she'd been *looking* for Cherrypaw, but then proceeded to reveal later in the conversation that she had seemed to know that Cherrypaw and I had been talking together.

Had she been *watching* us, and didn't want us to know?

I then narrowed my eyes. *And why did she seem to want to separate us once she discovered that we were with one another?*

I mean, Poppyfrost had called Cherrypaw over to her in the midst of one of our conversations before. That time, I had been able to brush it off after a little while, but this time, I found myself *way* more frustrated, especially with how close with Cherrypaw I was becoming. I mean, what was her deal?

Just days ago, I would have completely understood any mother wanting their kit away from me, as they were possibly under the assumption that I had nearly let two apprentices be killed by a fox. *So… why does Poppyfrost still seem to be acting that way now that the truth has come out?*

Chapter 17

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

The grogginess of sleep still seemed to be plaguing me as I sat beneath what was left of Silverpelt. The sky was a calming pale blue mixed with pink, only a few bright specks shining among it.

From where I sat just in front of the lake, I could feel the moistness of the early morning dew dampening my paws. The only sounds I could hear were the quietest ripples of the lake water, and the birds chirping as they always did when dawn was approaching.

I had never been up to hear or see all of these things very often, but because I had faced yet another restless night of sleep, plagued with more unusual dreams, I was now.

Or, *dream*, rather. Just one. A single kittypet dream with a single flashback, but just as lifelike as if I were experiencing it all over again. It was one that I had vaguely remembered up until now - the time that I had actually witnessed a border skirmish as a kittypet.

I had been peeking through the slits of my tall wooden fence, staring out into the forest as I always did at my past home - the home near the Clans' old forest territory.

This particular day, my stomach had practically twisted upside down with fear as I noticed a kittypet - a pale ginger tabby with dark stripes, one I had never seen before - wandering towards the forest many, many fox-lengths away from where I was.

From all of the spying I had done at this point, I knew that this tom was likely making his way into Clan territory, if he hadn't passed that mark already. Although his actions had seemed rebellious and brave to me at the time, I had felt a twinge of jealousy as well, wishing that I had that same courage to let my curiosity get the best of me and explore the forest, and find these wild cats that lived

lives that I was so enamored with.

And although that would eventually happen, thank *StarClan*, I simply stayed in place as I continued to watch this tabby tom, his fur slightly bristled as he constantly whipped his head from side to side cautiously.

I had then let out a very audible gasp as I noticed three new shapes appear into my sight. I hadn't known who these cats were at the time, but I now recognized them easily as Dustpelt, Sandstorm, and Sorreltail (likely Sorrelpaw at the time). Present-me had been able to deduce that they were on a border patrol, and had clearly caught the scent of this kittypet by the urgency in their pawsteps.

The kittypet had backed away, its gaze fearful as Dustpelt's gaze fell on him, and he let out an angry hiss. "Hey, you!" the tabby tom had growled. "What are you doing here?"

I had watched, my eyes wide as the strange tom then struggled to find his words. "I... I-"

"This is ThunderClan territory, and you are well inside of our border," Dustpelt pressed, interrupting whatever explanation the kittypet had been about to give, if he had even had one.

Sandstorm had then rolled her emerald green eyes and quickly ran up to Dustpelt's side. "Dustpelt, take it easy," the pale ginger she-cat urged him. "It's just a kittypet."

Dustpelt let out another hiss, seemingly ignoring Sandstorm's reassuring words. "A kittypet that is on our territory!" I had then felt my own fur begin to bristle fearfully as Dustpelt lowered down, his claws slowly sliding out as his lips curled back into a snarl.

To my relief, Sandstorm had quickly intercepted him, while Sorrelpaw simply watched the whole scene unfold in alarm. "A kittypet that clearly didn't realize that they were," Sandstorm had meowed sharply. She then lashed her tail towards the stranger, whose legs were clearly shaking. "Just let him leave. You've scared him enough."

For a moment, it had seemed like Dustpelt wasn't going to comply. But, luckily for the kittypet, after Dustpelt met Sandstorm's hard gaze again, he let out a small growl and stood up. "Fine," he muttered before turning around and flicking his tail towards the kittypet. "Get out. Now. The next time you're not getting off so easily."

I had quickly averted my gaze back to the kittypet with Dustpelt's words. The tabby tom, obviously very shaken now, gave a few anxious nods before pelting in the opposite direction of the patrol, back towards the Twolegplace. *Wow...* I had thought as I watched the tom's pale ginger pelt disappear from my sight. *He got off without a single scratch!*

I had then looked back towards the border patrol, and watched as Dustpelt, Sandstorm and Sorrelpaw left the clearing as well. I could just barely hear Dustpelt's scoffing as they headed deeper into their territory.

I had stared straight at the place that the three of them had stood in for what felt like moons, absolutely blown away by what I had just seen. Although I purred with amusement each time I looked back on this - I used to assume that wild cats never showed any cat that wasn't one of their own any mercy. If you stole their prey, intruded on their land, or even tried to talk to them, you were as good as *dead!*

But this moment had been the first time that I had ever seen these wild cats do otherwise. I had been so overwhelmed with admiration and awe at seeing them ruthlessly protect their territory, but still handle an intruder with fairness and "grace", in a way.

I suppose that later on, I would come to find out that that was part of what it meant to be a true warrior, but I had been completely oblivious to that then, of course.

Which was why... I had *no* idea why I had dreamed of this at all. This dream - along with many of the other flashbacks I had experienced - didn't make much sense to me at all. I still didn't understand why they had emerged so recently - whether they were coming from my subconscious, a sign...

I had come to realize that they almost seemed to be at a... *battle* with my "visits" to the Dark Forest. The nights that my darkest dreams were the strongest, my kittypet dreams would be minimal to non-existent, and vice versa.

Which meant that last night, I had only had my single vivid flashback, nothing else. I hate to admit that that was almost disappointing to me, if these kittypet dreams were truly blocking out any of my encounters with the Dark Forest.

Right now, when I was in quite an interesting bind - deciding whether to take advantage of an evil cat's proposal, or leaving the situation be, I almost wondered if being in the Dark Forest - seeing Ashfur or Tigerstar again - would give me a better idea of what I could do... how to make use of the situation.

Great StarClan, did I have a huge headache.

Not only had I gone out to the lake because I hadn't been able to sleep, but I had wanted to clear my head - something I feel like I was doing often at this point. After a bit of lying awake in my nest, I had decided to quietly and cautiously leave the den - making sure not to wake up Thornclaw in our nest - and go to a place that brought me some comfort before another busy day of training in the tunnels.

The lake was a beautiful sight that calmed me, especially in this time of day. It was also where I felt closest to my mother, Mistpelt, as the lake was the place that she had fearlessly gone up to StarClan, saving my own kits.

I hadn't heard anything from her since she had died, so every once in a while I tried to "reach" her, in a sense, by sitting by the lake. *Oh, Mistpelt, I'd give so much just to get a bit of your guidance right now...* I thought solemnly as I stared out at the water. *Where are you?*

Although I hadn't expected any sort of response, I still felt a twinge of disappointment as the silence of my surroundings carried on. *You know, when she wasn't lying or hiding things about our family, she was truly one of the wisest cats that I knew.*

After a few moments, I then finally let out a long sigh and stood up, deciding that I needed to return to camp. Dawn was nearly here, and I wanted to be on call and ready to go when Brambleclaw was to organize the patrols for the day.

I quickly broke into a run, feeling wet droplets fall onto my pelt as I stepped through the dewy grass. I'm not one to be late, and I'd like to keep it that way!

Then, I skidded to a halt, almost sure that I was just hearing things through my fatigue, when I recognized Firestar's yowl come from the ThunderClan camp just a little ways ahead. "Wake up! Every cat, into the clearing!"

I then gasped with the ThunderClan leaders next words. "WindClan is attacking!"

Holy pile of maggots...

I burst into a sprint once again, now more determined than ever to get back home. I let out a nearly breathless sigh of relief as the gorse tunnel came into sight, and I then swiftly slipped through it and into camp.

Well, actually, only traveling through the tunnel itself was swift.

I had just barely made my way out of it when I crashed head-on into the golden brown tabby fur of my mate, and it was all that I could see for a moment.

I then backed away from Thornclaw as I shook my head quickly, trying to get my focus back as fast as I could. Once everything around me had definite shapes again, I shook out my fur and took a step closer to the tabby tom. "Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry, Thornclaw!" I meowed to him, my eyes wide. "Are you okay?"

Thornclaw also shook his head quickly, blinking a few times as he did so. "I will be once I stop seeing you with two heads..." He then gave himself one more shake before he finally seemed to be in focus again. He let out a small purr and padded up to stand beside me. "I'm sorry, too."

He then bent down and began to gently rub his muzzle on the top of my head. "I think I got you right in the head," he purred to me, a bit of worry in his voice. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, don't worry! I'm completely fine," I reassured my mate as he pulled away to meet my gaze. I then let out a small purr and tilted my head as we stood up and began to urgently join the group of cats that were beginning to gather. "But I'm wondering what the *heck* you were doing standing right at the camp's entrance?"

"Oh, I knew that you had slipped from our nest a little bit ago, so I was just about to go out looking for you," my mate explained, then letting out a snort. "Well... it looks like I did... but I also found a bit of dizziness, too."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter and gave Thornclaw an affectionate nuzzle. *Even when we're about to go into battle, this one still manages to make me laugh...*

I was just about to give my mate a teasing reply, but thought better of it once the many voices of my Clanmates grew louder, surely drowning out anything that I could say. They were either anxiously speaking with each other, or asking Firestar questions that the poor leader probably couldn't answer until every cat was in the clearing.

As I looked over the crowd of cats, I began to well up with pride as I almost instantly spotted Goldenshine, who was standing with Hollyleaf, Brambleclaw, and Firestar. Not only was I proud of all of the hard work she had done to train her Clanmates in the tunnels, but at the moment she looked so calm and dignified, as if the thought of battle wasn't scaring her at all.

For me, the battle jitters that I usually had were finally beginning to rise - a mix of nerves, an increase in adrenaline, excitement, and determination to defend my Clan in whatever way I needed to. Although fighting in the tunnels had been completely foreign to me, I was pretty confident in my abilities, and I hoped that all of Hollyleaf's and Goldenshine's wisdom would stick with me in the midst of the battle.

And as much as I hated any sort of conflict, I will admit that I was

having some battle withdrawals. I hadn't fought in a full-on battle since the fight with ShadowClan over borders, just before I had found out that Thornclaw and I were expecting our second litter.

So, I was watching eagerly as Firestar and Brambleclaw were giving directions to the convened cats. "We will meet WindClan in the tunnels. We won't let them set a single paw on ThunderClan territory," Firestar was meowing out clearly to every cat. I was then confused to see him glance towards one specific cat - Dovewing. "As far as I know, WindClan hasn't trained to fight in the tunnels."

Despite my confusion, I quickly shook it off and was filled with triumph as I watched Firestar lift up his ginger head and call out, "ThunderClan will have the advantage!"

I then joined in as yowls of enthusiasm rippled across the camp. There seemed to be no uncertainty prickling among the group - we were certain that we were well-prepared for this battle, and we were going to kick these WindClan cats' rumps. *And we're going to prove to Sol that no trouble he tries to cause us can bring us down!*

Thornclaw and I then exchanged a determined glance before padding closer to overhear what plans were currently being laid out. "We'll split into three," Hollyleaf was meowing. "One patrol will enter the tunnel above the camp, a second will take the tunnel near the old Twoleg nest, and a third one by the lake. Our aim is to push the WindClan cats back into the cavern with the river."

"That sounds good to me," Goldenshine agreed with her friend, and partner in crime at the moment. "That's where we'll be given the most room to fight."

Brambleclaw had listened intently to the two younger she-cats' words, and proceeded to give them both an approving nod. The dark brown tabby then leaped up onto a boulder, and I watched in anticipation as he then seemed to be scanning through the group of cats, likely figuring out the battle patrols.

After a moment, the ThunderClan deputy gave a definitive nod. "I'll lead one," he began, "Hollyleaf and Goldenshine another..."

My ears then flicked in surprise as Brambleclaw's gaze fell on me, his amber eyes certain. "And Lilypetal," he continued, "You take the third."

Hold up.

A wave of pure shock and disbelief ran through me as I stared up at the deputy. I was almost tempted to question his words, but simultaneously, I was more than ready to do what was asked of me. "O-okay," I breathed, still completely bewildered. I then shook my head quickly and gave Brambleclaw a sharp nod. "Okay!"

I was an overwhelming mix of feelings of exhilaration and surprise as Brambleclaw then leaped back down from the boulder, and Firestar began to choose the cats who were to stay and guard the camp with him. *Well then... apparently I performed better in the tunnels that I had originally thought!* I realized as a knot slowly began to form in my stomach, and I suddenly felt like I really needed to poop.

I had never led a battle patrol before. I had assisted the leaders of battle patrols before, but I'd never done it completely on my own. I could hardly believe that Brambleclaw and Firestar were trusting me with this responsibility. *It... it feels like such an honor!*

Still in my state of astonishment, I slowly turned to face Thornclaw, whose pale blue eyes revealed immense pride and warmth. "Oh my StarClan, Thornclaw..." I breathed. "I'm leading a battle patrol..."

Thornclaw purred with amusement and flicked one of my ears with his tail. "Yes, you are," he replied before briefly licking my cheek. "And you're going to be absolutely fantastic."

I flashed my mate a grateful gaze as he pulled away, and I was instantly warmed by his words. "Oh, I sure hope so!" I exclaimed. I then watched Thornclaw's gaze soften as I mine locked with his, and I wound my tail around his own. "Do you want to join mine?"

A purr then rose in my throat as Thornclaw pressed his muzzle fiercely against mine. "Always."

I let my mate's touch ease me for just a moment. After I few heartbeats, I gave my mate a loving look and then proceeded to quickly flit my eyes around the camp, knowing that I needed to choose more cats for my group as soon as possible. *Hm... but who to pick?*

I tried to think as quickly as I could as I looked through the group of cats, and simultaneously trying to figure out which cats had already been chosen for other patrols. "Alright - Brackenfur, Dustpelt..." I began, narrowing my eyes as I concentrated on making my picks. "Whitewing, Rosepetal, and Foxleap - you're coming with me."

I then felt another rush of nerves and excitement as the cats I had called speedily ran up to me. I quickly did a headcount, making sure that I had everybody, before scanning my eyes across the group and giving them an inquiring gaze. "Are we ready?"

I instantly got nods and murmurs in reply. My patrol was ready to go, and I was the one leading to them to what they were ready for.

I gave the patrol a sharp nod, took a deep breath, and then proceeded to lead them out of camp. I could still not believe that I was at the very front of the patrol, and that I was giving so many *directions*.

I felt a bit bossy, but I knew that if I was to ever do this again, I'd have to get used to that irrational worry.

"Great, let's go!" I exclaimed as I crawled through the gorse tunnel once again. Once we were out into the forest, I then meowed, "To my knowledge, we are entering the tunnels through the entrance closest to the lake."

I then quickened my pace and lashed my tail, ordering the cats behind me to do the same. "It's a little ways away from here, but the other two patrols will need our assistance as soon as possible!" I explained, then breaking into a full run. "Let's get our blood pumping!"

I heard Whitewing purr with amusement behind me as every cat

began to run. "Let's do it!" she yowled out excitedly.

Everything around me then became a blur as I pelted through the forest, my patrol right behind me. My heart was pounding at this point, and it wasn't just because of the running.

Still being aware of what was in front of me, I turned my head to look over my shoulder towards Thornclaw, who was just a tail-length behind me. "How do you lead patrols like this so often?" I asked him anxiously. "My goodness, I'm so nervous."

My mate's eyes looked reassuring and certain as he looked back at me. "I can't tell at all, Lilypetal."

My eyes widened, as I was truly shocked by those words. "You can't?"

"Not even a little," my mate replied as he ran up to run just beside me. "A cat who didn't know you would think that you've done this countless times before."

As usual, I was grateful for Thornclaw's sweet words, and I felt another rush of determination. *And this is coming from not only my mate, but the tom who probably has more experience with patrols than any other cat in this Clan!* I told myself just as I was beginning to hear the sounds of battle in the distance. "Thank you..." I breathed as I began to slow down, the tunnel we were to enter through now being in view. "Good, I'm glad to hear you say that..."

I then came to a stop and turned to face my patrol. "Because we're here!" I meowed more loudly. "I'd give a motivational talk, but we're short on time - WindClan is already down there, having no idea of what's about to hit them."

I then stepped aside from where I had been standing in front of the tunnel's entrance. "Hopefully you all know the drill, already - enter one by one, and make sure that every one of us is inside the tunnel before you make *any* attack," I went on, the words I needed to say suddenly flowing out of me as easily as pebbles did in a stream. I then nodded to a few select cats in the group. "Brackenfur, Thornclaw and Dustpelt - you all will take the lead."

I then took one last deep breath and flashed an encouraging, determined look to every cat on the patrol. "Go," I meowed clearly after a moment, taking another step to the side. "I'm right behind you all."

I then watched as each cat filed down into the passage, out of my sight. Once Foxleap's red tabby tail disappeared into the darkness, I felt my adrenaline and will power rising all over again.

And after one more deep breath, I followed my patrol into the tunnel, all of my fear suddenly gone. Because, for the moment, no part of my dreams or personal worries mattered - defending my Clan was what *did* matter, and nothing else was going to get in the way of that.

Chapter 18

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I had the strangest moment of recollection, almost feeling like an apprentice running unknowingly into the tunnels once again, as I leapt into darkness. I had genuinely never thought then that I'd ever set a single paw down in these caves ever again, let alone for a battle at that!

Once I knew I had arrived to the open space, I immediately swerved to the side once my paws had settled onto the cold floor, allowing the battle patrol that was behind me to get through.

I then watched, trying my hardest to suppress nerves, as Dovewing, Ivypool, Sandstorm and Berrynose filed in. With each new cat that came into sight, the closer I knew we were to having to fight our opponents. *Come on, you've spent an entire night in these tunnels before*, I told myself as an attempt to keep calm. *This is exactly the same, except that there are more cats. And you have to fight some of them...*

I then sprung back up to my paws, ignoring the anxious pang in my stomach as Hollyleaf then burst through the tunnel. The fluffy black she-cat had taken up the rear, and was to be the last one to enter the tunnel.

Every cat has gotten into the cave, I realized. *We're ready now.*

I took a deep breath, shook out my fur, and finally turned my head to look beyond where I had just come from. And honestly, purring with amusement was the last thing that I thought I'd do looking back at the WindClan cats... but I did. It was already abundantly clear that they hadn't done any training in these caves at all, at least not to the caliber that we had.

They all looked incredibly uncoordinated, lost and confused - as if

they had all been blinded, and their paws had each been replaced with boulders.

And luckily, they already seemed to be carrying some ThunderClan-inflicted wounds.

My fur was beginning to tingle with eagerness and excitement now. I turned to Hollyleaf and gave her a small nudge as I met her green gaze. "Ready?"

I could clearly see the she-cat's sharp nod, even through the darkness. She then slowly crouched down as she muttered through gritted teeth, "Let's show these rabbit chasers who's boss."

After the two of us exchanged a determined glance, we then beckoned our patrol forward in order to begin advancing on the WindClan cats in front of us. I immediately recognized who I remembered to be Whiskernose, Weaselfur, Harespring, Heathertail, Furzepelt...

And then there was Breezepelt, standing at the front. His amber eyes seemed to be blazing like fire through the darkness. And even though I couldn't see it, I was sure that his black fur was probably bristled out.

A chill actually ran down my spine at the sight of this tom that I had once called my mate. Seeing his behavior with our conversation out in the forest had been shocking and unnerving enough, but seeing him in the midst of a battle felt even more so. I almost wanted to fly back to the past and give young-warrior Goldenshine a smack on the head with a stick. A really big stick.

I then tried with all of my might not to step back as Breezepelt and I locked gazes for just a moment. I broke away as quickly as I could and focused on Hollyleaf, who was making her way to the front of our ThunderClan patrol next to me.

"End this now," she demanded to the WindClan cats through gritted teeth. "You cannot win."

I then nearly flinched as Breezepelt spoke, his voice an enraged

growl. "Mange-pelts!" he called out, taking a pawstep closer to our patrol. "You tormented Sol!"

"We did no such thing!" Dovewing hissed back as she ran up to stand on Hollyleaf's other side. "We invited Sol into our camp. It was *your* leader who wanted him chased off."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as I noticed Heathertail shoulder her way up to Breezepelt. The usually calm, demure she-cat actually was currently reflecting her Clanmate in her demeanor. "And Jayfeather murmured Flametail!" she hissed back at us. "And you've been crossing our boundaries and stealing our prey!"

What?!

I practically had to keep myself from leaping at the she-cat with her words. Not just Heathertail, but any cat that carried the belief that Jayfeather was a murderer wasn't exactly on my good side at the moment.

The light brown tabby she-cat, unfortunately, was referring to the last Gathering that had occurred just about a quarter moon ago. Dawnpelt, a ShadowClan warrior and Flametail's sister, accused Jayfeather in front of all four Clans that the medicine cat's attempt at saving her brother a few moons ago, and his failure to do it, had actually been planned; Jayfeather had been trying to kill Flametail.

Obviously, every cat that knew Jayfeather well knew that that wasn't true at all, but sadly, he was now suspended from his duties as a medicine cat until he could prove his innocence.

For me, all of this was completely unfair, and the fact that cats were actually believing Dawnpelt's load of mouse-dung was *insane*, in my opinion.

And hearing Heathertail actually speak against my friend caused me to bubble up with anger, and I instantly felt that I needed to defend him. "You're just as out of your mind as Dawnpelt is if you think that Jayfeather would ever even consider murdering someone, let alone a fellow medicine cat, for StarClan's sake!" I spat back at her.

I then let out another hiss as the WindClan she-cat's second accusation that she had made finally set in. "And we're stealing your prey? How in the-"

"She's right!" Whiskernose cut in. "You always think you're better than us, just because we once needed your help before the Clans came to the lake."

I immediately whipped around to face the young WindClan tom, my lips curling back into a snarl as my claws slowly slid out of their sheathes. "Well, at the moment, I'd say that we are better than you, if you think that whining and making stupid allegations is the best way to handle this!"

I then was pulled out of my anger, suddenly surprised and alarmed as Breezepelt's blaring gaze quickly shot at me after my comment. Then, he let out a bloodcurdling yowl and threw himself straight at me before I even knew what was happening. Unfortunately, he was able to pin me down as I was taken by surprise.

Another growl began to rise in my throat as I struggled in my spot. This is the first time we've ever fought each other, I realized, and I found that it didn't trigger any sort of emotion. There was once a time that the both of us would have immensely dreaded the time that this would come.

But all of that worry and dread had washed away through the roughest river. Quite long ago, for the both of us. I looked up at my former mate's eyes as I struggled beneath him and saw nothing but rage, not one twinge of regret or sorrow at all.

I then let out a pained hiss as he sunk his claws deeper into my shoulders. "Say that again, Goldenshine!" he growled at me.

I flashed a confused, enraged gaze up at the black tom. "Oh, really? Lately, everything that I've said to you, you completely twisted around!" I barked back at him. "So, I'd say that that's pointless!"

Breezepelt then let out another hiss of utter rage, and lifted an unsheathed paw that was surely ready to give some scratches. But I was quicker, using my anger towards this tom to my advantage, and

managed to give him a swift swipe across the muzzle. He loosened his grip on my shoulders as he screwed his eyes shut, and I was able to slip out from under him.

Small and tight moves, Goldenshine, I reminded myself as I jumped back up to my paws. *Small and tight.*

With that in mind, I decided to leap straight at Breezepelt and push him into the cave wall closest to us. He let out a single gasp as his body slammed against the hard rock, but it didn't weaken him as much as I had hoped. He attempted to swipe at me a couple of times. And just as I let myself feel a bit of satisfaction, Breezepelt then let out another yowl, jumped off of another wall and dove straight at me again.

As his paws met my shoulders and pinned me down once again, I let out a silent huff as I landed hard on my back, the breath nearly being knocked out of me. I could barely stand the pain as Breezepelt then ran his claws down my flank while I simultaneously tried to catch my breath again.

At the moment, I was trapped, and was too weak to defend myself. And Breezepelt seemed to be showing no mercy at all. *At this rate, he might lose control and kill me out of his rage!* I thought fearfully.

I then nearly let out an audible gasp, shocked by my own thought. I mean, I was worried that Breezepelt - the tom that I had once thought of as the love of my life, the tom that was Swiftflight's father - would *kill* me. It was *that* easy of a prospect to picture.

I practically felt sick as I looked up at the WindClan tom's bloodthirsty gaze. *What did I ever see in you?*

I then screwed my eyes shut as I watched Breezepelt raise a single paw once again, his aiming spot quite clear.

And just as it appeared as if my awful premonitions were going to come true, I found that the weight above me had suddenly disappeared. I simply saw a flash of sandy gray fur as Breezepelt was practically yanked from his grip on me.

I was practically wheezing as I turned onto my side, finally able to get into a more comfortable position so that I could catch my breath.

But honestly, I completely lost it again as I looked up to see the cat that had come to my rescue. *Oh, no! No, no, no! Breezepelt would hurt him for sure!* I thought in dismay. *StarClan, no!*

Dustystorm currently had Breezepelt fastened to the ground, his pale blue eyes burning with bewilderment and fury. I had never, ever seen my mate look so angry. He had a sheathed paw pressed into Breezepelt's neck, while his other front paw was unsheathed, sinking into his flank. "Do *not* tell me that you were going to do what I thought you were," he then growled at Breezepelt, his strange tone nearly frightening me.

Breezepelt let out a contemptuous snort despite Dustystorm's hold on him. "What does it matter to you, *kittypet?*"

I then let out a hoarse gasp as Breezepelt then seemed to use all of his strength to shoulder Dustystorm to the side. Dustystorm lost his grip on the WindClan tom, but luckily used it to his advantage and simply gave Breezepelt a hard nudge.

Breezepelt lost his balance from where he had stood up, and slammed hard against the cave wall. While he was dazed, Dustystorm managed to give him a slash across the softer part of his belly, and then across the muzzle, right where I had hit him earlier.

And thank StarClan, Breezepelt seemed to finally be pushed to his limit. I stayed in my place, but struggled to my paws as the black tom shot Dustystorm one last look full of resentment before struggling to his paws and fleeing the clearing.

And any shocked or disappointed thoughts I was having of Breezepelt instantly went away as I turned back to Dustystorm, who was standing, but taking shallow breaths as he seemed to be coping with the pain of his new wounds.

I urgently ran up to my mate, my panic and worry for him giving me a rush of adrenaline and the strength to move. "Dustystorm!" I

exclaimed, flanking him so that he could lean on me. "I cannot believe you! Are you alright?"

Dustystorm let out a huff as he let himself lean into my shoulder just a bit. "I'm fine, Goldenshine-"

"No, you're not!" I insisted worriedly, beginning to look back and forth across his back and flank. "You're injured!"

Dustystorm quickly shook his head and fully stood up. "Every cat here is surely injured by now," he muttered. He then closed his eyes and let out a sigh before meeting my gaze, his eyes wide and grim. "But Goldenshine, I could tell that Breezepelt was trying to do a lot more than just *injure* you. I had to jump in and put that vicious fox-heart in his place."

At those words, I let my head hang low to the ground. Even though Dustystorm was the tom that I loved, I almost felt ashamed that I had ever admitted to him that I had once loved Breezepelt. And now, Dustystorm had watched him as he nearly tried to kill me out of his thirst for battle. "I... he was, wasn't he?" I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper. He was. I can't even begin to fathom why...

I then shook my head quickly, trying to push those uneasy thoughts away, and gave Dustystorm a quick lick on the ear. *If Dustystorm ever were to be even half as horrible as Breezepelt, I'd eat my tail!* I thought, the sandy gray tom truly being the kindest, most gentle tom I had ever known. *His sweetness and selflessness were part of why I fell so deeply in love with him.* "Well... thank you," I purred to my mate.

I then let out a huff and took a step back. "Stay here," I commanded to Dustystorm as I began to turn around, ready to jump back into the battle. "You're hurt enough already!"

Dustystorm let out a half-amused, half-skeptical grunt as he shook out his fur. "Nonsense!" he meowed as he ran up to stand beside me, his eyes gleaming with worry once again. "If anyone's staying here, it's you!" My mate then gave me a hard, warning look before pelting past me and disappearing into the battle.

I sat where I was for just a moment, staring at the spot that Dustystorm had disappeared. I then let out a snort and stood up. "Well, he's just as mouse-brained as the WindClan cats if he thinks that that's gonna happen," I muttered as I shook my head slowly.

I then let out a determined yowl, beginning to follow on the path that Dustystorm had taken, but I almost immediately paused once again as Swiftflight caught my eye in the distance.

The gray-black tom was staring straight back at me, and he looked completely alarmed and practically stuck in his spot. I almost felt my own heart breaking as I realized the possibilities of *why*.

Swiftflight had clearly just witnessed the fight between Breezepelt and me - the disgusted, terrified look in my son's eyes gave that away. I realized that Swiftflight wasn't aware of the state of his parents' relationship. As far as he knew, we were civil, and were happy in our agreement in Swiftflight being a ThunderClan cat. And the last time Swiftflight had talked to Breezepelt, he had been somewhat open and calm.

But our son had no idea of our quarrel at the WindClan border, our last encounter. So, surely, Swiftflight was appalled at seeing his father's aggressiveness against his mother. *The poor, poor thing. He's a grown cat, but he still doesn't deserve to see that.*

I then watched as my son flicked his gaze over to the place that Breezepelt had fled, before looking back at me and running over to my spot. Up close, I realized that he almost looked physically sick. I was actually shocked by how affected he seemed by all of it.

For a moment, he seemed unable to even speak. "Goldenshine...?" was the only word he was able to force out.

I flashed my son a look of sympathy and put the tip of my tail on his shoulder. "Later, Swiftflight," I reassured him gently before giving a nod towards the battle that was still in its uproar. "Come on."

Flanking each other, the two of us then burst back into the battle, immediately beginning to assist Dustystorm, who was currently

batting at Whiskernose. And with three cats on one side - Swiftflight in the middle with Dustystorm and I on each of his sides - getting the WindClan tom to flee was a breeze.

Well, that's honestly bad wording right now. We'll just say that it was very easy.

After the three of us exchanged a satisfied look full of triumph, I whipped my head around as I heard Hollyleaf's voice in the distance.

"Force them into the tunnels!" the black she-cat called out to the ThunderClan battle patrols.

I immediately sprang towards the nearest tunnel entrance I could see, letting my teeth show as I slashed my claws out in front of me, hopefully taunting the WindClan cats out, and then away from the tunnels.

Beside me, I could clearly hear Swiftflight's growl as it seemed to be rising in his throat, and I briefly glanced at him to see that he was staring, eyes dark with anger, towards a tall figure at one of the bigger tunnel entrances.

It didn't take me long at all to work out who it was. "WindClan! Stand and fight!" Sol called out as he watched the ThunderClan cats make their advances on the weakening WindClan cats. "You have no greater enemy than ThunderClan!"

I let out an irritated, annoyed hiss at the calico tom's empty words. "Oh, please!" I growled as I ran ahead to stand just in front of him. "Our greatest enemy is you, Sol! You're a traitor!" I briefly glanced back to Swiftflight, who I knew had followed me.

I then suppressed another hiss as I looked back at Sol. "And a liar, too," I muttered coldly.

"That's right," Hollyleaf then meowed as she ran up to stand next to me, her green narrowed gaze locking with Sol's. "Leave the Clans alone, Sol. You have hurt us enough."

Sol seemed to be bubbling up with rage at our defiant words, and

he released his rage with his words. "Never! Not until I've destroyed everything that the Clans stand for," he barked back at us. "Many seasons ago, I knew another of your Clans, far away in a gorge..."

Hollyleaf and I briefly exchanged a confused glance as the tom went on. "They scorned me, too; they told me that I wasn't good enough to be one of their precious warriors!" he explained. "So I vowed to prove to all of you that the warrior code means nothing."

I then took a step back, my protective instincts kicking in as Sol's gaze shifted towards my son. "And as for the lie, well... that was easy," he murmured, his eyes suddenly glowing with mischief. "I only had to be in your camp, around you, for such a short amount of time to be able to tell what you're striving for, Swiftflight."

His gaze then darkened as he leaned his head forward and meowed, "Many of your Clanmates don't trust you. The lie took no effort."

Beside me, Hollyleaf let out a hiss. "So, you admit it!" she concluded angrily.

Sol simply gave a shrug. "Even so, the damage is already done, isn't it?" he replied in the most annoyingly nonchalant way. "Isn't it concerning, Swiftflight, just how easily cats were able to believe me?"

I was almost too full of outrage to even protest or speak against Sol's words. My head practically felt light from how angry I was. "For whatever reason, they see you as a cold, dangerous and selfish tom," Sol continued, his eyes slowly narrowing down into slits, "and it's going to stay that way."

I then almost felt as if I was physically toppling over as I heard Swiftflight's hiss from behind me, and I turned around to find him crouched down, his claws unsheathed in front of him. "Over my dead body!" he roared just before leaping at Sol and easily being able to bowl him over.

I was frozen in place now, my own heartbeat pounding in my ears seemingly the only thing I could hear at the moment. Seeing my son jump at another cat in the way that he was, all I could think was

that he was returning to his malicious ways. "Swiftflight!" I yowled out to him, my voice breaking with worry. "What are you doing?"

Swiftflight now had Sol pinned down, and the big calico tom was struggling beneath my son's grip. He whipped his head towards where Hollyleaf and I stood, his yellow eyes actually revealing a bit of fear. "See? Look at this," he grunted, then looking back up at Swiftflight. "You're nothing but a vicious, short-tempered tom stuck in his ways. Attacking someone who does something as little as defy him without a second thought!"

Swiftflight let out a snort as he stared down at Sol, his eyes clear and determined. "I'm short-tempered, sure. You're right about that," my son muttered. He then narrowed his eyes and sunk his claw's deeper into Sol's shoulders. "But nothing else. I'm not attacking you because you're defying me, I'm attacking you because you've been defying my Clan, and of course that wouldn't need to be given even a single thought."

Swiftflight then bent down to hiss in Sol's ear. "And if you ever set another paw in our territory again, I might actually turn back into that cold, dangerous, vicious tom."

I then watched, now completely bewildered and astonished, as Swiftflight stepped back, and off of Sol. The large tom slowly got to his paws, and after meeting Swiftflight's firm gaze, didn't seem to hesitate to storm out of the cave and through the nearest tunnel.

Swiftflight let out an amused huff and followed Sol out for just a few pawsteps. "Get out!" he called out to him, his voice echoing in every direction. My son then glanced over his shoulder back at me for just a moment, his gaze playful and mischievous. "You worthless lump of fur!"

After a few heartbeats, Swiftflight then turned around as he let out a long huff, his eyes now dark and heavy with exhaustion. Before I could give my son any word of praise as he very-well deserved, I was interrupted as Dovewing burst in between Hollyleaf and me and approached the dark gray tom.

"Swiftflight! Why did you let him go?" the gray she-cat questioned,

her green eyes wide with shock. "He was at your mercy!"

I finally managed to get a word in, my heart feeling like it was going to explode with pride as I spoke. "Swiftflight did exactly as he was supposed to," I answered Dovewing, my voice hoarse with emotion. *I couldn't be more proud of my son right now if I tried...*

Beside me, Hollyleaf was staring thoughtfully at my son as he shot me a sheepish, amused look. "We have to let the warrior code rule our hearts," the black she-cat added on, giving a nod to my son. "The death of a warrior does not mean victory."

And now, Swiftflight knows that, and he embraces it. I thought to myself as I padded up to my son and gave him an affectionate nuzzle over the head with my nose. *He managed to let Sol go, even after he had lied to ThunderClan about him.*

I then turned around, away from my son, as I realized that the yowls and screeches of battle had gotten significantly quieter. I was surprised to see that there actually weren't too many cats left in the tunnels now. In fact, it appeared as if my Clanmates were beginning to leave, except for Lilypetal, who was currently helping Sandstorm to stand up; Brackenfur and Dustpelt, who seemed to be patrolling the area one last time; and a few more cats who were simply licking at their wounds.

There wasn't a single WindClan cat in sight; ThunderClan had won this battle.

I let out a long, satisfied sigh as Dovewing, Swiftflight and I then began to follow Hollyleaf out of the cave. I not only felt immense triumph for my Clan, but for Swiftflight, who was continuing to let the warrior in him come out that had been hiding for so long. He continued to amaze me every single day. It was almost like getting to watch him grow up all over again - getting to actually see what I'd thought I'd missed while he was an apprentice.

So to see his father, Breezepelt, go in the completely opposite direction, utterly confused and disturbed me. *Our son got knocked back into place,* I said to Breezepelt in my mind, even though I knew there's no way he'd hear it, *so... what is your problem, then?*

~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~

The battle already felt like another lifetime ago, even though barely half a day had passed now.

The camp was growing dimmer as the sun began to set from above, and I actually felt a slightly cool breeze brush my fur as I carried a thrush in my jaws, trying to push down nerves in my travel across ThunderClan's camp.

I planned to bring this thrush to Jayfeather from where he currently sat in the warriors den - the medicine den no longer being his home because of his suspension from his duties. I had figured that bringing the gray tabby tom some prey could be a gesture of sympathy, or even a gesture as an attempt to make peace with him because of the current situation we were in.

Although, I still wondered why I even needed to make peace with Jayfeather in the first place. For some reason, to the medicine cat - him not helping with Snowflight meant that the two of us were cutting all ties.

I get that he cared for Snowflight a lot, but surely, even then, he wouldn't let this get it to him so much? He should know that Snowflight wouldn't actually be angry at him for this, right? I wondered as I slowly crawled into the warriors den.

I then felt a pang of anxiety as my eyes fell on the gray tabby medicine cat. "Hey," I murmured through the prey in my jaws.

Jayfeather didn't give one indication that he knew I was there. Not until he spoke. "Hi," he replied after a couple of heartbeats, his blind gaze directed straight to the ground.

I then warily padded forward and placed my prey just in front of Jayfeather's nest. "Um... I brought you a thrush," I began hesitantly. I then let out a huff and backed away. "I know it's been harder for you to show your face, lately. So, I figured I'd take it to you."

When Jayfeather remained silent, I began to uncomfortably shift my paws back and forth. "I'm... really sorry about all of this," I then

continued as I let my head hang low. "Not just the Flametail situation, but..."

As Jayfeather continued to barely acknowledge my presence, I then realized that my planned attempt at an apology and peacemaking wasn't going to work for the moment. I sighed, shook my head, and turned around to leave the den. "I'm just gonna go."

"Goldenshine?"

I stopped in my tracks and looked over my shoulder, surprised as Jayfeather actually addressed me by name. "Yes?"

The tom simply gave me a curt nod. "Thanks," he muttered.

"Thanks?"

"For the thrush."

I couldn't help but feel a wave of sadness. *Thanks for the* thrush*? That's it?* "Sure," I nearly whispered before making my exit once again.

I then sat down just outside of the den as I continued to be filled with disappointment. I hated that this was how things needed to be. Just days ago, Jayfeather probably would have scolded me for my prey choice, or scoffed about how it took too long for me to even get it to him. He maybe would've even snapped at me for showing him any visible sympathy.

To any cat that didn't know Jayfeather, they'd be hurt by these kinds of things. But for cats like me, him simply showing gratitude for the prey was what hurt.

Taking this Snowstorm situation on my own really needs to be well worth it, I told myself, lifting my chin up as I forced down my dejection. *I need to take action soon.*

I then slowly averted my gaze towards where Snowstorm was actually sitting near the medicine den a few fox-lengths away, her blue eyes thoughtful as she sniffed at her poultice that had been applied to her shoulder.

I was then startled as the white she-cat returned my gaze, and then let out a snort a moment later. "Great StarClan, Goldenshine!" she purred, padding up to me. "Do I have a leaf on my head? A burr in my fur?"

I stared dumbfoundedly back at Snowstorm. "What do you mean?"

"You were staring at me," she replied. "It's getting somewhat creepy, if I'm being honest. That's not the first time I've caught you doing that."

I then shook my head quickly, surprised that I hadn't even realized that I'd been so obviously looking at the younger warrior, right where she could see me doing it. "Oh..." I breathed. I then let out a long sigh and closed my eyes. "Sorry."

I opened my eyes again to meet Snowstorm's amused, concerned gaze. "That's okay..." she reassured me, giving me a dip of the head in farewell before beginning to trot away. "But my goodness, you'd think that after all of this time, you'd learn your manners at least a little bit!"

I then stood, locked in my place and too shocked to even call Snowstorm back, as much as I wanted to. What did Snowstorm know about my lack of manners, one maybe would ask?

The answer would be that she doesn't. Not at all. Snowflight did, though. And what Snowstorm had just meowed was exactly something that my sister would have said if she were sitting here beside me.

The strangest mix of determination and apprehension began to rise up inside of me as I continued to watch Snowstorm walk away. *We're getting closer. I know that we are.*

I then stood up. *And I may know how to get even closer.*

Chapter 19

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I tried to stay as still as possible as I watched Leafpool, who was currently serving as ThunderClan's medicine cat, carefully apply a poultice to a nasty wound on my flank.

It had now been a couple of days since the battle between ThunderClan and WindClan, but unfortunately I was still needing to come to the medicine den so that I could receive some marigold to prevent infection, and a poultice to ensure that that would happen.

I would have willingly received treatment from any medicine cat, but I had to admit that Leafpool was definitely a breath of fresh air. While Jayfeather was a brilliant medicine cat, it was kind of nice not having to walk into the medicine den this frequently and hear something like, "Oh, it's you again. Let's get this over with".

And although I'd been complying with Leafpool's commands to come in every day and have a new poultice applied to my wound, the pain of it honestly hadn't been bothering me much at all. The excitement of the battle, the adrenaline rushes that I had felt, felt as if they hadn't faltered.

It was the first time that I'd ever fought in a battle that wasn't me just trying to prove that I was a strong fighter, or to prove that I was better and more skilled than my opponents. I'd truly fought to defend my Clanmates, and getting to be the one who had told off Sol and sent him off for good had only been an amazing bonus. *And I got the last laugh!* I thought triumphantly. *If I ever see that sick, lazy calico tom ever again, it will be too soon. And I'm sure I'm not the first to say that. I hope that I'm not.*

There was only one part of the battle that I wished I could completely wipe from my memory. *I mean, no cat wants to watch their mother and father fighting*, I thought as I relived the situation in

my mind - Breezepelt as he had pounced at Goldenshine, pinning her to the ground with nothing but malice and hostility in his eyes. *And they are from different Clans... but no cat should attack another in the way that Breezepelt did.*

I almost felt dizzy every time I thought about it, and what I knew about my father. From what I had seen in the Dark Forest, and what the Dark Forest cats were attempting to put into his head, he was deep into the trap that I had once fallen into.

And I could be sure, that had I stayed in the Dark Forest, I would have turned out exactly like him. It was sickening to think that I had come so close.

I guess I'm not like many young tom cats, wanting to be just like their father, I joked to myself, letting out an amused snort that Leafpool probably wouldn't hear.

I then turned to look at the she-cat as she stepped back and gave a lash of her tail. "Alright, Swiftflight. You're good to go," she meowed kindly. "Remember - make sure to take it easy. You not only want that poultice to be able to dry, but you want that wound to be able to heal as quickly as possible."

I stood up and gave the former medicine cat an appreciative nod. "Will do. Thank you, Leafpool. I..." I then trailed off of my words, suddenly feeling extremely uncomfortable as I quickly realized that Leafpool was staring at me - her amber eyes dark, but thoughtful. She didn't even seem to care that I had noticed. "Um... is something wrong?"

With those words, the light tabby she-cat's eyes widened, and she shook her head quickly as if to bring herself back to focus. "No," she replied surprisingly sharply, breaking her gaze from mine. "No, Swiftflight. Sorry."

I briefly flashed Leafpool a look of concern. "That's alright..." I breathed, then beginning leave the den. "Thanks again."

I then fully faced forward, a twinge of curiosity tugging at me. *Weird...* I thought as I crawled through the bramble screen and out

into the open. *But Leafpool has been busy since taking over for Jayfeather; surely she'd have a couple of moments where she drifts off.*

I then was pulled from my thoughts, completely startled, as I saw a flash of white in my peripheral vision. I briefly flinched before turning to see that it was Snowstorm. She hadn't even seemed to notice that I was next to her yet; her eyes were clouded, staring off at nothing as if she was deep in thought. *Speaking of drifting off...* I thought, amused.

I wondered how I was going to get her attention. My gaze slowly drifted towards the clump of moss on the ground on my other side, thinking that throwing at her might be an easy, and... *fun* way to snap her out of it.

But I immediately thought better of it, and decided to lightly tap her on the shoulder with my tail instead.

So, I slowly lifted up my dark gray tail and gently touched it to my friend's shoulder. "Hey..." I murmured, peering my head around to try and meet her gaze. "Snowstorm?"

Well, the kinder attempt at getting the white she-cat's attention didn't work, and throwing moss at her probably wouldn't have had any stronger of an effect.

Snowstorm let out an alarmed yelp as soon as my fur had brushed her shoulder. She quickly whipped herself around to face me, her blue eyes wide and fearful, but they grew calmer once she saw that it was me. "Swiftflight, Great StarClan!" she breathed, her head lowering. "Do *not* scare me like that!"

"What?! I don't know what else I could've-" I began to reply angrily, but cut myself off. Snowstorm had clearly had something on her mind, and I needed to give her a break. "Sorry," I meowed after a deep breath.

Snowstorm let out a sigh and then sat back down in her same spot. "Yeah, I am too," she murmured. She then let out an irritated huff and shook her head quickly. "I'm sorry too, I mean."

I couldn't help but let out a small purr of amusement, noticing then just how ruffled and jumbled Snowstorm looked, even after she'd calmed down from me startling her. "Are you okay?" I asked the she-cat, trying to meet her gaze from where she stared at the ground.

But it wasn't working. "Yes..." Snowstorm muttered, her eyes flitting around anxiously. "No. Well, I think so?" She then let out a huff, shaking her head quickly once again before giving me a sheepish look. "I haven't been getting a lot of sleep lately."

"That's okay," I reassured my friend, a bit of laughter in my voice. I then sat down as well, flashing her a concerned look. "What's the matter?"

I was then surprised to see Snowstorm let out a seemingly helpless whine. "What else could be the matter?" she replied with dismay. She then bent her head close to my ear as she whispered, "These dreams are driving me up the den walls!"

I let out a sigh as Snowstorm then pulled away. "The dreams, huh?"

"Yes, the dreams!" Snowstorm replied, shaking her head slowly as she looked back down at the ground. "They're getting stronger and more ominous every single night. And they're making less and less sense."

She then returned her gaze to me, her eyes a mix of annoyance, confusion, and fear. "The past few nights, amidst the images of Ashfur, the Dark Forest, and the medicine den, I find myself in random areas-"

I narrowed my eyes back at Snowstorm. "Random areas?" I couldn't help but question out of my confusion.

Snowstorm shrugged, her demeanor still anxious. "Well, random areas of ThunderClan territory," she explained. "That one clearing surrounded by bramble bushes... the lake... and strangely enough, that place deeper into our territory with the clump of juniper berry bushes."

I simply nodded slowly, listening as intently as I could as the she-cat went on. "And actually, when I'm in those places - when I'm *awake*... I get so dizzy and lightheaded. It's so scary..." she murmured, her eyes getting wider and wider the more she spoke. "Swiftflight, am I sick? Am I actually going crazy?"

I immediately shook my head back at Snowstorm. "No, Snowstorm," I replied evenly. "You're not sick, and you're not going crazy." *In a way... it's actually the opposite.*

Snowstorm continued to stare wide-eyed back at me. "How do you know?"

I almost gave my friend an answer, but physically had to bite my tongue to keep myself from doing so. But I *hated* to see Snowstorm this way; I felt such an impulse to ease her worries, and tell her why she was likely having these dreams. I probably could even deduce why she was feeling dizzy in the places she had named.

I felt so badly that she was in such a scary, strange, unsettling situation that she couldn't do anything about. I wanted to be able to reassure her based on what I had been told by Goldenshine.

But even with all of that, I felt more strongly that it still wasn't my place to break all of it to Snowstorm. It would be like trying to explain to a cat how to swim - I knew how it worked, and I'd seen other cats do it, but it wasn't enough to where I could help them to actually be able to swim with just the information that I had.

But luckily, I still had a way of bringing Snowstorm some comfort. A way that might also simultaneously assist some other cats. "Snowstorm, maybe..." I began thoughtfully. "Maybe you should consult Jayfeather or Goldenshine about this?"

Snowstorm let out a contemplative grunt and tilted her head to the side. "Jayfeather or Goldenshine?" she repeated. "Yeah, Jayfeather would probably be of great help. He may be suspended from his duties, but surely he'd still be willing to help me figure out what's going on..."

I then watched as my friend's face then seemed to wash over with

confusion. "But why Goldenshine?" she asked me.

I returned Snowstorm's gaze with a teasing look. "Hm... well," I began to answer, giving her a nudge. "Let's just say that she's probably a lot more wise to your situation than you might think."

Snowstorm continued to look confused, but seemed to grow a bit more understanding after a moment's thought. "I see..." she murmured, then giving me a flick on the ear with her tail. "Thanks, Swiftflight. I'll definitely consider that."

She then elongated out into a stretch as she let out a yawn. "Alright, I'd better get going," she meowed casually, sounding much more at ease now. "I'm going to watch Wrenpaw, Emberpaw and Lightningpaw train, since I missed that one training session that Firestar had you watch." The she-cat then began to walk away, but paused almost immediately and looked back at me. "What are you going to be up to?"

I opened my mouth, ready to give Snowstorm an answer saying that I wasn't sure yet, thinking that I'd maybe even go with her to this training session. But just as I did so, my eyes fell on the fresh-kill pile, where I recognized the ginger tabby pelt of Cherrypaw settled down near it.

Snowstorm quickly noticed that I wasn't answering her, and attempted to follow my gaze. She then let out an amused huff, and when her head turned back to me, she revealed her mischievous, narrowed eyes. "Nevermind," she murmured, almost as if she was trying to suppress a purr. "I'll see you later."

I could only see Snowstorm padding towards the camp entrance out of the corner of my eye as I continued to stare at where Cherrypaw currently sat. For some reason, my fur seemed to tingle with happiness and nerves even just looking at her.

In the strangest way, I'd actually been excited that Goldenshine had been needing to take it easy after the battle in the tunnels, because that meant that Cherrypaw wasn't being taken out to train as often - only when other warriors had the time to spare. I'd been hoping to maybe find the opportunity to help with some of her training... or

even just take her out hunting for fun.

I hadn't done many things just for "fun" many times in my life... I was trying to get used to it, and I knew that doing it with Cherrypaw would make it even easier.

So, I took a deep breath and began to confidently, somewhat nervously, pad over towards the fresh-kill pile. I was honestly somewhat frustrated with how anxious I was becoming with each pawstep I took. *Swiftflight, you're just asking her to go hunting with you, for StarClan's sake!*

I then stopped in my tracks, not being able to suppress a hiss as I caught what I had failed to notice in my travels.

Poppyfrost was settled down close to her daughter, appearing to be sharing this prey with her.

I gritted my teeth together and tried to push down my frustration, because now I was reluctant to even approach Cherrypaw at all, being fully aware of her mother's strange behavior towards the two of us lately. Unless the Dark Forest had completely deprived me of detecting social cues - it had been pretty apparent that, for whatever reason, Poppyfrost didn't want us near each other.

I then flicked my ears as a thought occurred to me. *But... what if that's actually the issue? What if my past is causing me to blow this out of proportion?* I asked myself. *After that, the fox situation, and what happened in the tunnels, I'm so set on cats being cold and accusatory towards me, but that's not the case for everyone, anymore.*

I took a deep breath and forced myself to keep going. *And maybe it's just taking Poppyfrost some time to process that I was the one that saved her daughter, not Sol,* I rationalized. *This is going to be fine. Maybe she'll even appreciate me asking for permission for Cherrypaw to go hunting with me.*

I finally paused just in front of where the two she-cats were settled down, and I immediately felt warmth welling up inside of me as I saw Cherrypaw's amber eyes light up.

But to my dismay, I looked over to Poppyfrost to find that her gaze was quite hostile.

But nevertheless, I clung onto the hope I had and tried to ignore it. "Hi, Cherrypaw," I purred to my friend, then more hesitantly dipping my head to her mother. "Poppyfrost."

The tortoiseshell she-cat didn't say anything in reply, but I was somewhat encouraged, considering she wasn't immediately sending Cherrypaw or me away. So, I continued, trying to keep my gaze on the older cat. "Um... I was wondering if I could maybe take Cherrypaw out hunting?"

I looked over to Cherrypaw, suppressing a purr as her eyes managed to light up even more. "Hunting?" she repeated cheerfully. "Really?"

I found myself having to look down bashfully after just a heartbeat. "Yeah... well, I..." I then lifted my head back up at my own internal urging, giving Cherrypaw a nervous shrug. "I-I figured that I'd help in keeping you busy while Goldenshine is resting up."

Cherrypaw then stood up, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Oh my goodness, that would be great!" she exclaimed happily. The two of us then locked gazes for a moment, causing my heart to beat faster, before Cherrypaw eagerly looked back to her mother. "Could I, Poppyfrost?"

Poppyfrost returned her daughter's gaze, but flashed me a sidelong glance that almost made me want to back away a pawstep. "Aren't you going to finish this squirrel?" she asked, nodding to the prey they had been sharing. "You've barely taken two bites."

I continued to wait in anticipation as Cherrypaw gave a shrug. "Oh, I wasn't even that hungry to begin with. You can take the rest of it!" she answered. "If I get hungry, I'll just catch something while Swiftflight and I go hunting."

My heart began to beat even faster as Poppyfrost's blue eyes shot me another glance, and then narrowed down into slits. "Hm, well, if you were to go hunting, surely you should go with a senior warrior?"

I could barely stand not having an answer any longer, and I felt that I needed to put a word in. I took another step forward, put the tip of my tail on Cherrypaw's shoulder, and gave Poppyfrost a reassuring glance. "I may not be a senior warrior, but don't worry," I meowed, trying to keep my voice lighthearted, "you can trust me to take Cherrypaw out and bring her back in one piece."

Poppyfrost's hard gaze didn't change one bit as she stared back at me. "I'm not so sure about that."

I pulled my tail away from Cherrypaw's shoulder, exchanging a bewildered glance with her. "...Excuse me?" I directed to Poppyfrost.

The tortoiseshell she-cat shrugged. "Seems pretty straightforward to me," she murmured. "I'm not so sure about you taking Cherrypaw out hunting."

I was immediately overcome with fear and dismay. It was just as I had feared, if not worse. I flicked my gaze over to Cherrypaw to see that her eyes reflect everything that I felt. And by the look on her face, I could easily tell that she'd been having the same suspicions that I had, and was currently worried as much as I was that they were being confirmed.

"What in the name of StarClan are you meowing on about?" the ginger she-cat meowed back at her mother, taking a step closer to her as her fur began to bristle out. "He saved Molepaw and me from a fox, and was the one to send Sol away!"

Poppyfrost's gaze only seemed to darken with Cherrypaw's words, which only seemed to drive her to push harder. Cherrypaw looked at me warmly as she then meowed, "He is *completely* trustworthy."

She then looked back to her mother. "Couldn't I go, Poppyfrost?"

I then watched Cherrypaw's gaze grow alarmed as Poppyfrost let out a hiss and stood up. "*No*, Cherrypaw! How many times do I have to tell you?" she replied sharply. "I refuse to let you go hunting with him, or do *anything* with him, for that matter."

My head felt so light at this point that I could barely hear Cherrypaw's response. "What?" the she-cat asked, her voice higher with surprise. "Why?"

I screwed my eyes shut, shook my head, and forced myself back into reality, despite reality not really being my favorite thing at the moment. "Yes, I'd like to hear this one also."

"The very fact that you think that he is trustworthy is a big part of the problem," Poppyfrost hissed to Cherrypaw before whipping her head towards me. "I couldn't care less that you stopped that fox from going into the bushes that my kits were in, or that you were the one to apparently scare Sol off. Two heroic actions don't give you a pass with me, Swiftflight, and I personally think that they shouldn't with anyone else."

I couldn't help but let out a hiss of anger, and I felt my fur beginning to bristle out defensively. "What are you saying?"

Poppyfrost hardened her gaze, taking a step closer to me so that we were almost muzzle to muzzle. "I don't want you around Cherrypaw, Swiftflight," she hissed to me sharply. "I thought that I could send that message to you subtly, but that obviously didn't work."

So... I was right, I thought. *Poppyfrost was trying to keep us apart.* I was so dumbfounded that my next words were barely louder than a whisper. "But... I didn't even..."

I then let out another hiss of annoyance as I realized the possible reason why this she-cat had been so hostile with me for so long. I actually couldn't believe that she'd remained so petty about it after so long. "Wait," I began, trying to push down the growl rising in my throat, "is this all just because I told Cherrypaw to knock it off when she was coughing in the nursery all those moons ago?"

Poppyfrost seemed shocked, and almost offended by the question. "That, and everything beyond it!" she replied furiously. "Swiftflight, you are a violent, angry, coldhearted tom. You are rude to all of your Clanmates, you hurt them in something as little as battle practice, and as you've mentioned yourself..." She then lashed her

tail towards Cherrypaw, who was staring at the two of us as if Tigerstar was picking rose petals between us. "...you snap at them when they irritate you!"

"Poppyfrost, do you hear yourself?" Cherrypaw asked, still looking completely horrified. "This is all complete foxdung! Even if Swiftflight ever was that way, he's changing!"

To my surprise, Poppyfrost flashed a half-indignant, half-smug look back at her daughter. "Hm, using unsheathed claws on Ivypool tells a different story, doesn't it?"

Shoot... I closed my eyes, feeling overwhelmed with disappointment and helplessness as Poppyfrost directed her words towards me again. "What I say is true, and I don't want your influence on my daughter."

I then opened my eyes to see that the she-cat was now flicking her eyes back and forth between me and Cherrypaw, her eyes narrowed. "I'm not blind," she went on. "I can see what's clearly sparking between the two of you, and it can't happen - not on my watch."

I was too hurt, worried, and baffled to even speak. I was so speechless that I couldn't even come up with the words to defend myself, Cherrypaw, or our situation. Even when a phrase or sentence would come to mind, something seemed to be holding me back from saying it. I could see Cherrypaw flashing me an encouraging look out of the corner of my eye, and although it further brought me to want to make an attempt, I never even got the chance.

Because Poppyfrost finally broke her hostile gaze from me and gave a sharp nod to her daughter. "Cherrypaw, rather than going out hunting, you can go to the warriors den and see if Goldenshine is ready to train with you," she meowed emotionlessly.

She then walked in between the two of us, and then away. But she paused after a moment, giving me that same hard look that practically made me sick to my stomach at this point, knowing the meaning that now stood behind it - the horrible, horrible meaning.

Her gaze seemed to burn into me as she then meowed, "And StarClan forbid she brings you anywhere near her son."

Chapter 20

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I was feeling very uneasy at the moment - partly because of the surroundings that I was in, and partly because it was strange to me that these surroundings were uneasy to me in the first place.

I never thought that I'd ever have the misfortune of having to look at them again - the tall structures, colored from gray, to red, to white; the looming fences, or the rough, stone Thunderpath whose wind brushed my fur with each monster that passed.

Although I recognized every single thing that I passed by, I still felt as foreign to all of it as any forest-born warrior would.

It wasn't a fun feeling at all, and I had to admit that Thornclaw's comments that he was making as he walked just behind me weren't making things any easier.

"Great StarClan," my mate hissed as we crawled out from the other side of some shrubs. "This grass is so spiky and short!"

"Oh yes, quite spiky and short," I muttered in reply as I kept my gaze ahead.

"I have heard at least three different dogs barking since we've gotten here. Are we sure that they're behind fences?"

I briefly looked over my shoulder and gave Thornclaw a nod. "Behind fences they are, Thornclaw."

"And we're right next to the Thunderpath!" he went on. "What if a monster starts to prey on us?"

"They won't bother us unless we bother them."

Thornclaw then let out a snort. "I'm already being bothered," he

muttered though gritted teeth. He then let out a sigh and quickened his pace so that he was walking next to me. "And Lilypetal, we are right out in the open... in the Twolegplace!" As I flashed him a sympathetic look, he then let out a huff, his gaze falling to the ground as he shook his head. "I don't like this at all."

I purred with amusement and put the tip of my tail on my mate's shoulder. "And you think that I do?" I meowed as I still purred. "I'd rather stick my muzzle straight into mouse bile-filled moss than be here!"

Thornclaw then shifted his gaze back up to me. "Got some moss dipped in mouse bile?"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I touched my nose to the golden tabby tom's ear. "You know, you can go ahead and start heading back, Thornclaw; I can watch the kits. We wouldn't be too far behind you!" I insisted kindly to him. I then pulled away to look ahead, making sure we were still heading in the right direction. "We're just going to have a quick little family reunion, and then we'll be on our way again. I don't want you to stick around if you're uncomfortable."

I then watched, still slightly amused as Thornclaw sighed and looked over his shoulder to where Emberpaw, Wrenpaw, and Lightningpaw were walking a little ways behind us. They were looking around the Twolegplace, their eyes wide as they whispered to each other.

My mate then returned his gaze to me once again, his eyes still revealing a bit of unpleasantness. "Hm. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm more uncomfortable leaving you and the kits alone... here." He then stepped closer to me, his gaze now revealing some warmth beneath his begrudging demeanor. "I'm staying, but that mouse bile still sounds quite appealing right now."

I let out another purr of amusement and gave Thornclaw an affectionate nuzzle. "Understandable," I replied. I then pulled away to give him a reassuring, teasing look. "Don't worry, grumpy-mouse. We're almost there. I made sure that Oreo was to give me the most specific directions possible so that we wouldn't get lost!"

I then sniffed as my eyes flitted around the Twolegplace again. "-meaning that we'd be here longer than we'd like."

"Being here even one heartbeat is longer than I'd like."

"Oh, goodness," I purred, giving Thornclaw a nudge before shifting my gaze ahead once again, confirming with myself that Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw, Emberpaw, Thornclaw and I were indeed going the right way.

That right way actually being a Twoleg nest, as horrible as it probably sounds. The only thing that was actually keeping my paws going in this direction was the fact that this Twoleg nest was now Oreo's new home.

My brother had actually managed to run into me for the second time while I had been on a hunting patrol a few days ago. He had come to tell me that he'd actually managed to find a new house, and new Twolegs to live with in the Twolegplace nearby (apparently, his pitiful, needy look he had given them had done the trick).

And, as I had promised him once, I was now taking the opportunity to visit him and introduce him to my second litter of kits - his own kin.

To my complete surprise, Thornclaw had actually agreed to come along with me, *but he's clearly already somewhat regretting his decision, the poor thing.* I thought as I pressed my flank comfortingly against my mate, continuing search for the marks and indicators that Oreo had told me to look for in order to find where he now lived.

I was murmuring them out loud as I went along. "Turn around the corner, and you'll see a gray house with orchids by the front door..." I let out a small grunt of satisfaction as I saw just that, before picking up my pace and continuing in my expedition. "Keep going along the sidewalk until you see the house with a wrap-around porch that has red chairs, and then turn the other corner..."

"I don't understand half of what you're saying, and it's honestly kind

of scaring me," Thornclaw meowed, sounding like he was only half-joking.

I let out a snort as we veered around the corner, following the path laid out by the rough sidewalk. "Trust me, I'm surprised that I'm not gagging these words," I murmured.

Just a heartbeat later, I quickly came to a halt, gasping at the sight in front of me - the tall, bright-red brick Twoleg nest that Oreo had described to me. "There it is!" I exclaimed.

I heard Emberpaw also let out a gasp from behind me. "We're here?" she squeaked.

"Wow, Clan territory is nowhere in sight!" Lightningpaw then breathed in amazement. "How weird is this?"

I then looked back at my three kits to see that Wrenpaw was looking right back at me, his pale blue eyes filled with caution and concern. "You seem strangely excited, considering we're looking at a Twoleg nest," he observed, his head tilting to the side.

I snorted yet again as I beckoned my three kits forward with my tail. "Oh, goodness, I'm not excited about this horrid, StarClan-cursed structure at all!" I replied to my son. And after my kits all purred with amusement, I went on, "It's the cat that we're here for that I'm excited about!" *And thank StarClan that my excitement at seeing my brother is overriding my immense disgust with where I am!*

"What did you say his name was?" Lightningpaw asked as we slid past the open gate. "Oreo?"

"What's an Oreo?" Emberpaw then added on once we had arrived our pre-destined location.

I slowed down my pace, eventually coming to a stop once I was standing just a tail-length in front of the tall brick wall of the nest. I looked back at Emberpaw as she had asked her question and gave her a small shrug. "Honestly, I couldn't tell you."

I then looked back up to the wall that I was standing in front of, luckily immediately being able to spot a window up above. For

whatever reason, Oreo had commanded me to find this window, climb up to it, and give it a small tap.

I tried to force down my welling-up nerves as I crouched down in preparation to leap. Although I trusted my brother, I hoped with all of my heart that this plan was going to be a no-Twolegs-at-all-whatsoever one - that I wasn't going to have to lay eyes on a single Twoleg in this entire expedition.

I sighed, continuing to lower myself until my belly fur brushed against the grass. "Alrighty... here goes nothing!" I breathed before finally leaping up and fastening my claws into the wall. I cautiously made my way up, stopping once my paw had an easy reach to the window. I made sure that I had a secure grip in the wall before raising one of my paws and tapping a single unsheathed claw against the window a few times.

I then quickly leapt back down and pelted into the bushes below, suddenly feeling a strong wave of fear and dread - worrying that I would catch the wrong "thing's" attention. StarClan, please!

After waiting in anticipation for a few moments, my heart then skipped a beat as I suddenly saw a flash of movement at the very window I had just touched. But luckily, I immediately recognized the black and white pelt of my brother, Oreo. He had leapt up to the window and now seemed to be looking outside.

Once he noticed the five of us crouched down low in the shrubs, he rolled his eyes and purred with amusement just before using one of his paws to turn a latch and push the window open. Thornclaw, the kits and I slowly and hesitantly made our way out of the bushes as Oreo gracefully jumped down from the window.

As soon as his white paws had touched the ground, he ran up and touched his own nose to mine. "Good gosh, if you all had been hiding any deeper in those bushes, I wouldn't have seen you at all, and would have just turned back!" he joked, his hazel eyes gleaming with humor.

I purred as well, exchanging a glance with Thornclaw. "Well, the thing is, we wouldn't exactly like to be noticed by very many

around here."

"Oh, I understand!" Oreo reassured us, then proceeding to lash his tail back towards the window he had just come out of. "Don't worry - this is the part of the house that my housefolk don't really go in. They shove these weird pelts into this big white cave that shakes and makes a lot of noise, and then they leave! They probably didn't hear your knock, and they wouldn't notice if I slipped out for just a moment."

I couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. "Okay, good," I replied, the giving my brother a teasing hard gaze. "But you'd better be aware that we're bolting if a single hairless head appears at that window!"

Oreo let out a purr and dipped his head. "Duly noted," she meowed. He then shifted his gaze to my left, giving a nod to my mate next to me. "It's nice to see you again, Thornclaw."

Thornclaw gave a polite nod in return. "And you too, Oreo."

I then watched as my brother flashed my mate one last friendly look, and as he peered past us, his eyes seemed to brighten even more. "Well, I'll be darned!" he purred, padding past Thornclaw and I and approaching the three younger cats behind us. "Are these the three strong, brave, and intelligent kits that you told me all about, Lilypetal?"

I quickly gave my brother a nod in reply. "I'm glad that you recognized them immediately!" I purred back as I exchanged a look full of pride and humor with Thornclaw.

The single she-cat of our second litter then stepped forward to stand in front of her two siblings, giving Oreo a lash of the tail in greeting. "Hi!" she meowed cheerfully. "I'm Emberpaw!"

Oreo looked bewildered as he stared back at his kin. "Emberpaw?" he repeated before briefly flashing me an amazed glance. "I'd name you mini-Lilypetal!"

Emberpaw, who was indeed known as the near carbon-copy of me,

purred with amusement and shrugged at Oreo's words. "I guess mother and father decided against it!" my daughter joked. She then flicked her tail and nodded to the two cats beside her. "These are my brothers - Lightningpaw and Wrenpaw."

Lightningpaw quickly stepped forward, almost as if he had been waiting to speak. "Hi!" he meowed in his usual friendly voice. He then tilted his head to the side as he stared at Oreo. "Huh... you kind of look like me!"

Oreo flashed Thornclaw and I another astonished glance before looking back at my son. "You do!" he agreed as his gaze became teasing. "Good going on that - you clearly know what you're doing." My brother, his eyes wide, then turned to Wrenpaw, who had simply given him a curt nod in greeting. "And you look just like your father, my gosh!"

"Yes, he does," I purred, giving Thornclaw an affectionate look, who had simply been watching Oreo meet his kin through a warm gaze. "He's got his amazing pale blue eyes too!"

"Well, how about that," Oreo muttered as he continued to observe Wrenpaw. "You know... they almost remind me of Mistpelt's pale blue eyes too. Looking at them alone... I'd almost think that I was staring back at her!"

I nearly let out a gasp once I had processed Oreo's words. "Wow..." I breathed as I looked at my son. "They do, don't they?" *Mistpelt's eyes were so familiar to me... I guess I didn't even think twice of my son having ones that were so similar,* I thought as I exchanged a sorrowful look with my brother.

He then sat down and wrapped his tail around his paws as he looked back at my brown tabby son, his gaze solemn. "Embrace those eyes of yours, Wrenpaw - they carry on the legacy of quite the hero."

I actually had to shut my eyes for a moment, almost as if to hold it the grief and despair that threatened to come out. I then felt Thornclaw wrap his tail comfortingly around my back as I let my eyes open again, and I let out a shaky sigh. "True words," I nearly

whispered. *Very, very true words.*

I then took a moment to look up at the sky, as it almost brought me comfort now, knowing that now Mistpelt was up there somewhere, hopefully looking back down at me from where she stood in StarClan. *She could even be meeting my gaze right now, and I have no idea,* I thought. *Oh, what I'd give to be able to look at those warm, gentle eyes one more time...*

As I continued to stare up, it took me a bit to realize that the sky I was actually looking up at wasn't blue anymore, and was actually beginning to wash over with the orange and pink hues of dusk.

I let out a deep breath before finally lowering my head to look at the cats around me. "And I'm about to say some more true words," I tried to meow more cheerfully as my wave of grief began to diminish. "It's getting late." I then glanced sadly over towards Oreo. "We're trying to return home before it gets too dark."

Oreo, his eyes full of understanding immediately ran up and touched his nose to mine again in response to my words. "And that'll be here before you know it!" he replied. He then pulled away, and I was amused to see him lick his lips. "Go on ahead - it's almost time for me to go inside and get my dinner, anyway!"

He then looked behind him and met each of my kits' gazes warmly. "I'm so glad that I got to meet your kits."

Lightningpaw gave an enthusiastic nod to Oreo in return. "It was great meeting you too!"

"And it was wonderful getting to see you again," I purred, flicking Oreo's ear with my tail. I then let out a snort, briefly glanced at Thornclaw with a single eyebrow raised, and murmured, "Although we didn't particularly enjoy the circumstances, it was lovely getting to see you at your new home!"

"Awesome, indeed!" Oreo purred back, giving me a nudge. "Especially now that I'm so close to my sister!" Then, after the two of us shared a laugh, he tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, his hazel eyes hopeful. "See you soon?"

"I'll try my best," I meowed warmly in reply, now having to try and ignore my sadness as I turned around and began to lead my family away. "Goodbye, Oreo!"

"Bye!" Thornclaw then called back as he ran up to flank me.

I then was briefly able to see Oreo lash his tail as a gesture of farewell before I focused my eyes forward, still side by side with Thornclaw as I began to retrace my steps, and beginning to head back into the reality that I knew. This reality actually being quite uncertain and strange at the moment.

This trip to the Twolegplace had been one of many distractions I'd been able to enjoy - some of the others being leading battle patrol, actually fighting in a battle and proceeding to *win* it - but I already knew that all of the things that had been swirling around in my head for the past couple of quarter moons would soon-enough resurface all over again.

I'd then go to sleep, and have more dreams that either confused me more or taunted me - making me feel guilty for not taking action - action that I didn't even know *how* to take, or what action I was taking.

At least, not completely. But as I continued in my travel through the Twolegplace with Thornclaw and the kits, I thought up an interesting, potentially very helpful idea.

I found myself beginning to slow my pace, nearly coming to a stop. "Hey, Thornclaw?"

Thornclaw, who was now just a bit in front of me, immediately paused and looked back at me. "Yes?"

"You can go ahead and take the kits back to ThunderClan," I meowed evenly to my mate, brushing my tail against his shoulder. "I'll catch up to you all soon enough."

Before I could even begin to explain my reasoning for that, Thornclaw quickly cut me off as his pale blue eyes flashed with alarm. "What do you mean?" his voice rising with worry. "Lilypetal,

do not tell me that you're-"

I took another step forward, purring with amusement as I nuzzled my muzzle into Thornclaw's cheek. "I'm not, Thornclaw. Don't worry," I insisted to him, instantly being able to figure out what he'd assumed I was maybe doing.

Which was probably, you know, wanting to return to my old life - no big deal. "I just need to talk to Oreo about something for a moment," I went on. "Like I said, I'll just be a few heartbeats behind you."

As I had expected, Thornclaw still didn't look convinced. "But that means that you're going to be traveling alone!" he reminded me fearfully. He then quickly whipped his head around, looking in all directions of the Twolegplace. "*Here!*"

I let a mix of a laugh and a sigh as I stared reassuringly back at my mate. "Let's put it this way - if I, as a kittypet, was able to travel through a forest without getting harmed all of those moons ago, then I think that I, as a fully trained ThunderClan warrior, can handle the Twolegplace now."

Thornclaw sighed and closed his eyes at my genius analogy. "Alright," he meowed after a moment, touching his nose with mine. "Please be careful, Lilypetal." The golden brown tabby tom then pulled away, and I let the purr rise in my throat as I met his warm gaze. "See you back at camp."

"Goodbye, sweetheart," I meowed softly. I then watched as Thornclaw gave me one last loving but wary look before turning and catching up to the kits, who had padded ahead. As their father then began to walk side by side with them, I heard Emberpaw let out a gasp.

"Oh, darn it!" I then heard her exclaim. "I never got to ask him what his name meant!"

I let out a quiet purr of amusement at my daughter's comment, and then whipped myself around to head in the opposite direction. I was already feeling a bit panicky, and hated that I was staying in the

Twolegplace longer than planned, but I tried to remind myself that it would hopefully be worth it.

I then picked up my pace, hoping that I wouldn't have to retrieve my brother from inside the nest again, and was relieved to slither through the gate and find him in the same place we'd left him in. *Oh, StarClan - you're being very kind today!*

He was sniffing at some flowers that grew beneath the shrubs against his fence once I had arrived there. But he lifted his head as soon as he'd heard my pawsteps, and his eyes widened and ears flicked once he saw me.

"Lilypetal?" he meowed in shock as he ran up to meet me. "What are you doing here, without the others?"

I then held back a purr of amusement as his hazel eyes widened even more. "Are you seriously-"

I let out a snort and raised my tail up high. "No," I quickly answered. I then sighed, finding I was beginning to grow nervous as I shifted my paws back and forth. "Actually... well, firstly I wanted to check and see that it was okay that your dinner was delayed just a bit?"

My brother's eyes immediately seemed to fill up with concern. "Oh, yeah?" he questioned. He then shook out his fur and sat down. "Well, of course it is, if it's for you!" he then meowed kindly as he wrapped his tail back over his paws. "What's going on?"

I sat down as well, and found that it was hard to meet Oreo's gaze. "Well... I wanted to ask you for some advice."

"Advice?" Oreo repeated, sounding utterly surprised. "*You* are asking *me* for advice? This must be bad..."

I actually managed a purr of amusement as I glanced back up at Oreo. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, my courageous, strong wild cat sister needs advice from a *kittypet* - seems strange, if you ask me!" he explained, his voice full of laughter. "But nevertheless, I'm glad to help!"

"Good!" I meowed, then giving an anxious shrug. "Well, I suppose that it's not even advice that I need, if that makes you feel better."

I then took a deep breath and forced myself to fully look back at my brother. "Could... could I give you a hypothetical situation?"

Oreo gave me a slow nod, and his gaze and demeanor showed that he seemed ready to listen. "Go on..."

I continued to shift nervously in my spot. "Alright. Well..." I began, immediately pausing so that I could gather my thoughts and my words, which I knew would need to be spoken clearly and eloquently, as this "hypothetical situation" I was presenting to my brother was actually my *life* at the moment, but there was no way in StarClan that he was going to know that.

But at the moment, in the midst of my troubles, he felt like the perfect cat to get advice from, which is why I had decided to return to speak with him. I trusted him with my whole heart, and because he was a kittypet not bound by the warrior code, and who didn't live by any of the Clan's beliefs, he would possibly give me a good outside perspective on what I was going through, and what I could do about it.

I then shook out my fur, speaking as soon as the right words came to mind. "So, let's say... that there was a cat here that... well - let's just say that you had somehow gotten on their bad side."

I then cut myself off so that I could refigure what I had been saying. "Well, actually, because you confronted him... I mean - *them* for doing something that wasn't right - that's how you got on their bad side," I stammered, trying to keep my voice even. "And after that, they hurt you over and over - and those you loved, too - determined to make you feel that same pain and betrayal that you brought them..."

I then trailed off as I tried to think of what to say next. "This hurt that they have put upon you has become unbearable," I eventually continued. "So much so that you'd do anything in your power to put a stop to it."

I then looked back at Oreo from where I'd been staring off to find that his eyes were clear and pensive. "What if you had the opportunity to do so - get revenge on them... stop them once and for all - What would you do?" *I mean, this hypothetical cat probably wouldn't visit you in a dream and give you a proposition that carries an opportunity for revenge, but surely your advice would still apply...*

I immediately pushed away my thoughts, my nerves becoming overwhelming once again as I stared back at Oreo's concerned gaze. For a while, he didn't even speak, and he simply looked back at me as his eyes slowly began to narrow down into slits.

"Hypothetical situation, huh?" he murmured, just as the length of silence was about to seem incredibly uncomfortable.

All I could think to do was give my brother a quick nod, and as small as the gesture was, it was the fattest lie that I'd ever told.

But the last thing that I wanted to do was burden yet another one of my family members with my Ashfur troubles, so I simply watched as Oreo gave me a skeptical look, but them genuinely seemed to think about what I had laid out to him. "Well, gosh. That's a difficult one," he murmured. "But, honestly..."

"Yeah?" I asked, prompting my brother on.

"As crazy as this may seem, and as tempting as revenge may feel, that's not the way that I would go, at least not all the way..." Oreo murmured, almost as if he was speaking his thoughts as they came to him. "I'd give them a chance to show remorse; to promise that they'd change. Obviously, this cat was very hurt by what I'd done to them, and felt that revenge was the only way to reflect that."

He them shifted in his spot and snorted. "And who knows? Maybe they wouldn't change even if they were given the opportunity to..." he continued on, taking another pause just before giving a sharp nod with his last words. "But I'd still take that chance."

For many moments, I couldn't even reply after Oreo closed off his answer. I was too in awe of how much it had opened my eyes, and just as I had hoped, it had given me exactly what I needed to hear

Oreo had just given me some great advice. Really, *really* great advice. He'd just helped me immensely, and he had no idea.

And because of it, I actually thought that I might've had an idea of what I needed to do - what action I actually needed to take.

I needed to return to the forest, and back to ThunderClan as soon as possible.

"Lilypetal?" Oreo meowed, breaking into my thoughts. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head quickly and stood up. "I'm great," I replied, and then bent forward to touch noses with my brother yet again. "Thank you so much for the advice, Oreo, but I need to get back to camp right away!"

Oreo pulled away, seemingly amused by my sudden eagerness. "Okay, then..." he murmured, his eyes glowing with humor as he turned around and leaped up to his window. "Hurry! The moon is beginning to rise!"

I took a quick glance up at the sky and felt a twinge of panic as I noticed the many specks of Silverpelt beginning to appear up in the sky. "It is, indeed!" I exclaimed before quickly turning around and leaving through the gate. "Goodbye! Enjoy your dinner!"

Then, without waiting for any other reply, I began to pelt away from Oreo's home and through the Twolegplace. My adrenaline and drive was up like it had never been before, and because the sun was almost fully set, I wanted to get back home as quickly as I could before Thornclaw or any of my Clanmates began to worry.

As I continued to run past houses and fences, I slowed down just a bit, wondering if I was just imagining the pawsteps that I was hearing come from behind me. *It sounds like something is shuffling the grass that's not me.*

But after a couple of heartbeats, I simply shook my head quickly and continued to run. *Emotions are high right now, and there's a lot on my mind - I'm surely just being paranoid,* I told myself.

But just a moment later, I nearly fell face-first into the ground as I skid to a very fast halt, completely startled as some large bushes shook in front of me.

And then, when I had just barely gotten over the scare of the noise, my fur began to bristle out as the terrifying, looming figure of a Twoleg slid out from the bushes.

I hadn't laid eyes on a single Twoleg since I had left the greenleaf Twolegplace to join the Clans all those moons ago, and it gave me just as much of an uneasy, icky feeling as walking through the Twolegplace had.

I was frozen in place. *Holy foxdung.*

The pink, hairless creature was clearly trying to make their movements slow and deliberate as they walked toward me with their arms outstretched, but that didn't matter one bit to me. They could have been lying there, *motionless*, and I'd still be terrified of them.

My heart was practically pounding out of my chest as I turned away from the Twoleg and began to run in the other direction like I never had before.

But I had barely been able to get anywhere as I faced yet another Twoleg on my other side, who was carefully making their way towards me just as the other one had been.

Obviously, I wanted to leap away from the two horrible animals who were clearly attempting to trap me, but I was already feeling overwhelmed with dread at the realization that I couldn't.

To one side of me was a fence. I could climb it, yes, but possibly be intercepted by a cold, hairless arm.

And to the other was the Thunderpath, and I could already hear the roaring of a monster about to pass by at any moment.

I decided against neither, attempting to think fast and leap in between one of the Twoleg's hind legs. But as quick and swift as my jump had been - the creature's movement to grab me was even

more so.

I had barely gotten anywhere when I felt the Twoleg's huge paws wrap around my belly. And my heart practically felt like it was sinking as I was lifted from the ground.

No! Let me go, you piece of foxdung!

I could hardly believe that this was happening to me - especially right now.

I hissed, yowled, and clawed at the Twoleg with all of my might. "No!" I wailed out loud as I slashed in all directions. "Let me go! *Please* let me go!"

But it was no use, as the Twoleg quickly restrained my front paws from being able to do a thing. It pulled me even closer to it as the other stroked my head, cooing words that were completely unintelligible to me.

I felt physically sick. *StarClan, I have to admit that I'm going to be holding a bit of a grudge on you for this one,* I thought bitterly, feeling overwhelmed with anger, fear, and helplessness as I was carried off deeper into the Twolegplace.

Chapter 21

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Goldenshine? Goldenshine!"

I was practically jerked back into the present by Cherrypaw's call, and quickly whipped myself around from where my gaze had been locked on some bramble bushes to face my apprentice. "Hm?"

Cherrypaw looked unusually impatient as she padded up to me. "You're zoning out again!" she meowed irritably. "Great StarClan, I've been calling your name for what has felt like a moon!"

I stared, absolutely bewildered, as the ginger tabby she-cat then let out a huff and sat down. "We're supposed to be training here!"

*Ex*cuse *me? Who are you, and what have you done to Cherrypaw?* I thought as I had to clench my jaw in order to keep it from dropping all the way to the ground in amazement. "You're right," I muttered. "It's looking like we're going to need a training session on how to get rid of attitude next." *I thought Swiftflight was going to be the only cat I'd need to give that lesson to!*

I then watched as Cherrypaw let out a sigh and closed her amber eyes. "I'm sorry, Goldenshine..." she mewed as she lowered her head down with shame and shifted her paws back and forth. "I'm... I'm just not in the best mood right now."

I let out an amused snort. "Yeah, no kidding!" I joked before padding up closer to my apprentice and lightly touching my nose to her ear. "Is everything okay?"

I pulled away to find that Cherrypaw's gaze had managed to look even more regretful and sad, but what was worrisome was the fact that her words said otherwise. "Um... yeah. Yes, everything's fine," she replied. She simply stared ahead, her eyes still dark for a

moment, and then proceeded to shake her head and flash me a reassuring, apologetic gaze. "Really. I'm sorry that I snapped."

I wasn't convinced at all by Cherrypaw's words, and I couldn't help wanting to probe into this situation of hers that was clearly giving her a hard time, but I held back. "That's okay, Cherrypaw," I meowed softly to her, wrapping my tail comfortingly around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, too." *Sorry, I was just casually trying to decide how to tell your Clanmate that she's actually carrying my sister's spirit. Forgive my tomfoolery,* I thought to myself, only half-joking as I reflected on the reason Cherrypaw had needed to *yell* to get my attention in the first place.

I then let out a long sigh as I looked down at my apprentice, who, for a reason that I didn't know, looked as mentally exhausted as I felt.

So, I came to a decision. "Hm... clearly the two of us aren't in the best of headspaces right now," I murmured out loud, then giving Cherrypaw a light nudge. "I think that we should go ahead and call it a day. How does that sound?"

Cherrypaw let out a quiet gasp and looked back up at me, her eyes wide with surprise. "Calling it quits early?" she asked worriedly. "Are you sure?"

I gave my apprentice a definitive nod and stood up. "I think that we both need it!" I replied. I then quickly began to lead the way forward. "Come on, let's get back to camp and get something to eat."

I paused for a moment and glanced back at Cherrypaw, who looked incredibly wary as she stood up. I honestly wasn't surprised at all, because although Cherrypaw clearly needed some time to clear her head, she wasn't one to usually let it become a burden and impede on her training at all.

So, it took her a moment before finally deciding to follow me. "Okay," she breathed, running ahead to stand beside me. "Let's go."

Then, without another word, the two of us began to make our way back to the ThunderClan camp. Although I wasn't even traveling at

a very fast pace, Cherrypaw was trailing just behind me, her gaze looking down at the ground as her tail dragged on the forest floor.

The sight was something that made me incredibly uneasy, along with all of her past behavior in the last few days since the battle. Not only had Cherrypaw - being one of the sweetest cats in ThunderClan - snapped at me, but she'd just seemed overall upset, and not herself at all since I'd been able to get back up on my paws after the battle in the tunnels.

And as worried as I had been for my apprentice, there had been something else occupying my mind even more than that. There was something that I had been wanting to do, and unfortunately my battle recovery and getting Cherrypaw back on track with her training had been a delay to it.

But I was determined to take action in Snowstorm's situation, something that was now definitely a long time coming, but had been put off so many times due to the uncertainty of all of it.

And, well, things were still uncertain now, but I felt if anything could be done right now, it would be that I help Snowstorm to find out who she really is. And I unfortunately also had needed to take it on without Jayfeather's help, and I didn't want that decision to be a waste.

Over the past few days I'd been trying to think of the words to say to the she-cat, and figuring out how to even approach her in the first place. How in the name of StarClan was I even going to reveal all of this to her without completely freaking her out? *Goodness, it's all so scary, and all I'd even be doing is being the one to tell her!* I thought, letting Cherrypaw go in first as we arrived at the camp entrance. *Oh, StarClan, why can't you just bring her to me? That'd be a much easier way to start.*

"Goldenshine!"

My ears flicked, surprised as I heard my name as soon as I had come out of the other side of the tunnel. And I was even more surprised, to say the least, when I looked up to see the white pelt of Snowstorm quickly running up to meet me. "There you are, finally!"

she breathed once she had gotten to me. "I've been waiting for you to get back."

I widened my eyes back at the younger she-cat as my heart began to beat faster. "You have?"

"Yes!" Snowstorm replied, the tip of her tail beginning to twitch. "Brambleclaw said that you and Cherrypaw had left for training a while ago, and-" She then cut herself off, shaking her head quickly before focusing her gaze on me once again. "Anyway, could we talk?"

I was completely dumbfounded at this point, actually convinced that StarClan had heard my desperate plea. "You want to talk to me?" I questioned Snowstorm, trying to keep my voice even.

She gave a single sharp nod in reply. "Yes. Is now a bad time?"

No! No! My goodness, it's the best time, you have no idea! I thought, not even hesitating to answer the she-cat as I gave her a reassuring shake of my head, knowing that I was practically being given an opportunity to do what I had been wanting to do. "Not at all," I answered her before turning to face my apprentice, who had been politely watching our exchange in silence. "Cherrypaw, you can go ahead and get yourself something from the fresh-kill pile and take a breather." I then leaned forward to touch my nose affectionately to her cheek. "I'll see you soon. Great training session today."

Cherrypaw gave me a brief warm, appreciative look. "Thank you, Goldenshine," she replied in a cheerful voice that sounded somewhat forced.

And it was clear that that was the case, as she gave me a long, sorrowful look and then turned around and immediately let out a sigh, slowly traveling towards the fresh-kill pile.

I watched my apprentice go for a few heartbeats, my heart welling up with sympathy and worry for her, before turning around and beckoning Snowstorm to follow me with my tail. And my concern for my apprentice slowly began to be replaced with immense nerves as Snowstorm padded up to flank me. "So, talking?" I tried to meow

casually. "Let's do it."

Snowstorm purred with amusement as she began to follow me. "Alright," she replied as she still purred. "I'm sorry if this seems completely random. Swiftflight said that I should talk to you, actually."

What?

I paused from where I had been emerging through some shrubs - the entrance to a fairly secluded spot I knew well, and I slowly turned my head to look back at Snowstorm. "Swiftflight did?" I asked in astonishment.

I then proceeded forward, letting Snowstorm make her way through the bushes behind me. "Yes, he did," the white she-cat answered. "You see, the poor cat has been having to listen to all of my nonsense, and he suggested that I talk to you about it."

Swiftflight sent Snowstorm to talk to me? I asked myself, wondering if my son had been sensing just how much I'd needed to speak to his friend.

I wasn't sure if Snowstorm's were going to have to do with what I needed to reveal to her myself, or I could possibly have been blowing this whole thing out of proportion. What if she had just been gushing to Swiftflight about a cat she was mooning over, and he didn't want to hear about it?

Either way, I was too overwhelmed with anticipation to even speak, and simply waited and watched as Snowstorm seemed to be figuring out what she wanted to say. "Nonsense, huh?" I purred, deciding to lighten the mood just a bit. "I'm always up to talk about nonsense!"

Snowstorm purred with amusement. "Well, I'll admit that it's probably a bit more than nonsense," she murmured. She then tilted her head to the side. "Or not? Maybe..."

I then backed away, startled as the younger she-cat let out a growl and shook her head violently. "Great StarClan, I don't know!" she

then meowed irritably as she began to pace. "Dreams are supposed to be nothing but nonsense, but I can't understand why they're bothering me so much!"

I slowly narrowed my eyes as I watched Snowstorm walk back and forth across the clearing. Her words had been vague, but I already knew exactly what they meant, and what they could possibly be allowing me to do - and holy heck, was that going to be a lot.

I rose to my paws and urgently ran up to meet the she-cat. I gently ran my tail across her flank and then used it to press down her haunches so she'd sit down. "Steady, Snowstorm," I meowed to her softly. *Steady, Goldenshine. Steady.* "What dreams?"

I then watched as Snowstorm attempted to take a deep breath, but it didn't seem to calm her all that much. "Dreams of fighting and darkness, the medicine den, the Dark Forest, the bramble clearing in our territory, and juniper berry bushes, for StarClan's sake!" she explained, almost sounding as if she were in hysterics. "My goodness, I probably sound crazy! And if I'd only seen these things once, of course I wouldn't think much of it, but it's every single night!"

Snowstorm then began to shake her head slowly as she looked back at me. "*Every single night*," she then meowed tautly, "and it's all so frightening."

She then closed her eyes, let out a sigh, and looked away from me again as she shrugged. "I'm sorry, I probably sound like a feather-brain, but Swiftflight said that you might know what's going on with me, and I had to take that chance."

For a while after Snowstorm had spoken, I could do nothing but stare back at her in complete disbelief. I mean, I was in total awe of everything I had just heard. It was in that moment that I realized that the she-cat's destiny had been creeping up on her, calling out to her more strongly than I could have ever imagined. The poor young warrior was being driven crazy by all of these things see was seeing, and not having a single idea of what all of it meant.

I knew that now, there was absolutely no reason for her to live in so

much oblivion anymore. I was now completely certain of what I needed to do, and I was also completely certain that I was now being given the perfect opportunity to do it. It was clear that all of what Snowstorm was going through was stressing her beyond belief; she needed to know the truth.

I took a deep breath and met finally Snowstorm's gaze again. *Swiftflight was right,* I thought, feeling a twinge of warmth and pride for my son, who had clearly given some thought to the advice he'd given his best friend. *And you were right to take that chance.*

I then broke my gaze away from the she-cat as I whipped myself around and began to pelt out of the clearing. "Snowstorm, come with me," I called back to her. "Quickly."

I now felt nothing but certainty and determination as I then led Snowstorm out of the bushes and into the camp clearing. I could practically sense the younger she-cat's utter confusion, but I was sure that soon enough, she would be seeing things more clearly than she ever had before. *And I know exactly how to make that happen,* I thought confidently, what I needed to say and do now coming as easily to me as catching prey.

Just within heartbeats, I arrived to my planned spot - the medicine den. I settled down just a few tail-lengths from its entrance, and watched as Snowstorm did the same, just a bit more hesitantly. A chill then ran down my spine as she adjusted herself into a more comfortable position, sitting up straight and wrapping her tail around her paws.

In that moment, her stance looked so much like Snowflight, that I almost felt weird asking her what I was about to. But nevertheless, I took a deep breath and met Snowstorm's gaze steadily.

Here goes nothing. StarClan be with me. I then felt a pang of sadness as I took a quick glance at the warriors den. *And give me all the strength and confidence that I'd have if Jayfeather were beside me. Let me doing this without him still be worth something.* "Snowstorm, do you by any chance know of Snowflight?"

"Snowflight? Of course I do," Snowstorm quickly replied, clearly

trying to hide her confusion at the change of subject after earlier. "She was your sister. Poppyfrost named me after her, right?"

I gave Snowstorm a slow nod. "Yes, she did," I answered. I then shifted closer to her, hardening my gaze just a bit to prompt her on. "What else do you know about her?"

I tried to wait as patiently as possible as Snowstorm seemed to be grasping at her own knowledge. "Um, well..." she murmured just before flicking her tail towards the medicine den beside us. "Oh, she was a medicine cat alongside Jayfeather, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was," I confirmed for Snowstorm. I then let out a sigh as I began to be pulled into my own memories of my sister. "She had originally trained as a warrior beside me, but decided later on that being a medicine cat was her true calling."

I then couldn't help but let out a small purr of amusement as I shook my head slowly. "I didn't like that very much at first, but it didn't take me long to realize that she had been onto something - healing and herbs seemed to come to her more easily than fighting moves ever could."

I then began to shift nervously in my spot, wondering what the response would be to my next words. "You know... you've always seemed to have been pretty knowledgeable about herbs, and I've definitely caught you wandering around this den a few times, Snowstorm," I went on, keeping my gaze on the she-cat as I tilted my head to the side. "You've even said before how it all seems so familiar to you. And just now, that you've had dreams of this medicine den on several occasions?"

Snowstorm let out an exasperated huff. "Too many. I feel like I know every single piece of that den now, and every single herb that's in there just by what I've seen in my dreams." I then watched as her gaze grew confused all over again. "But... what of all of it?"

I then just barely caught her surprised expression as I turned around and began to pad away from her once again. "Goldenshine?" I heard her call out. "Where are you going?"

I didn't look back at the she-cat as I replied, set on getting to our next destination as soon as possible. "Keep following, Snowstorm."

I luckily heard Snowstorm's quick pawsteps behind me as I then led her out into the forest, which was tinted in a bright orange light with the setting sun.

I then began to slow down, taking a quick glance behind me to see that Snowstorm was still there, before completely coming to a stop next to a patch of juniper berry bushes. I then looked back to Snowstorm again to catch her coming to a stop, her eyelids flittering as if she was trying to escape a daze she was in.

"Are you alright?" I asked the white she-cat.

Snowstorm gave me a reassuring flick of her tail as she then sat down. "Yes, I'm sorry. I'm just a bit lightheaded," she answered to me before shaking her head quickly, her eyes widening as she began to take in our surroundings. "Wait a moment... this is one of the places that I see so often in my dreams!"

"Yes, I figured that," I muttered. I then backed away a couple of pawsteps and gestured to the bushes we were standing in front of with my tail. "Do you know what those are?"

Snowstorm stared at the green clumps for just a heartbeat before answering. "They're juniper berries, right?" she asked, her blue eyes brightening. "Oh, I've always loved the smell of them, and they are the prettiest blue I've ever seen..."

The white she-cat then trailed off, giving me yet another, confused, suspicious look. "But Goldenshine... what-"

"This was one of Snowflight's favorite parts of ThunderClan territory," I began to explain to her before she could finish her question. "She and Jayfeather would often go out to gather herbs, and if he lost her, he'd usually know to find her here."

I then flicked my tail towards the shrubs once again, and I found that the more I was speaking the more my heart seemed to sink as I spoke so much of the past. "Snowflight also loved juniper berries,

and she described them just as you did."

I then took a deep breath as I looked down to the patch of dirt at my side, fighting through grief to speak my next words. "Which is why she was buried here - right next to the place that always brought her comfort and happiness."

I then looked back to Snowstorm, finding that she was also looking at Snowflight's burial spot, her blue eyes narrowed and thoughtful. "Snowflight is buried here?" she asked, her voice just barely above a whisper. "Right here?"

"Right here, Snowstorm," I answered her, standing up. "In this place that you've dreamt of so much."

And with that, I noticed a clear change in Snowstorm's expression. Her eyes weren't filled with puzzlement anymore, but curiosity rather.

It gave me all of the encouragement I needed to keep going, and lead Snowstorm deeper into ThunderClan territory. "Come on," I urged her on. "I have one more place to show you."

This time, as I began to trot forward, Snowstorm seemed to follow me without any hesitation. Clearly, something that I was doing was getting to her, and if there was any chance that she was understanding what I was trying to tell her, I was going to take it and proceed on.

But just as we were about to arrive to my final spot, I stopped in my tracks and whipped myself around as I heard Snowstorm let out a hiss. Her eyes were screwed shut, and her teeth were clenched as she dug her claws deep into the ground.

My ears flicked up in alarm. *Oh, no! What's going on?*

I urgently ran up to the young warrior. "Snowstorm! What's the matter?"

I then felt an immense wave of relief as she let out a huff and opened her eyes again. "Goodness, it felt as if a huge boulder slammed onto my head for a moment there," she breathed before

proceeding to give her head a shake. "It's fine. Let's keep going."

She has a headache now in this clearing... and felt lightheaded at the juniper berry bushes earlier, I recalled as I warily continued on at the she-cat's urging. *Interesting...*

I then paused only a moment later, realizing that we had arrived at our next stop. I glanced back at Snowstorm, who was scanning her eyes in all directions.

"The bramble bush clearing..." she murmured so quietly that I barely caught it. "... The same exact clearing that I've seen so many times..."

She then steadily came to a stop as her gaze finally stopped on me. "Goldenshine, how is it that you're..." She then trailed off, seemingly too amazed to go on.

I stood up again, padding up to stand just in front of the white she-cat, still certain that all of her confused, spiraling thoughts would soon disappear with what I had to say. "Snowstorm, do you know how Snowflight died?"

At this point, Snowstorm didn't even seem thrown off by my questions anymore. But she still gave my latest one a lot of thought, her eyes dark as she stared at the ground. "She... she was killed by Ashfur, wasn't she?" she answered me, shutting her eyes and taking a deep breath before meeting my gaze with sorrowful blue eyes. "You avenged her, didn't you? You killed Ashfur?"

"And I did it without a moment's hesitation," I told Snowstorm. "Ashfur killed Snowflight in this very clearing, and I was the one to find her." I then had to close my eyes as grief threatening to rise up inside of me once again. "It was all so *sickening*, seeing her like that, and at the same time having to process the fact that she was most definitely gone."

Snowstorm stared back at me, her eyes wide with sympathy as she listened. "That... that must have been absolutely awful, losing your sister like that. And... and to Ashfur, too..." she nearly whispered, raising her tail so that she could place it on my shoulder. "This

clearing must hold a lot of significance to her..."

The white she-cat then took her tail from my shoulder as quickly as she had put it there and stood up. "...Just as the medicine den and the juniper bushes do," she murmured, her eyes narrowing down into slits. "All things that I've dreamed of... all things that I identify with."

I nodded slowly back at the she-cat, my fur beginning to tingle at the realization beginning to happen in front of me. *It's all working!* I thought as I practically tried to hold in an excited squeal. "You're right."

"I seem to have a lot in common with Snowflight."

"You definitely do."

After several bone-chilling heartbeats of silence, Snowstorm then slowly turned her head to face me once again. "Goldenshine... can I ask you a question?" she meowed as she padded around so that she was face-to-face with me. "Why have you told me so much about Snowflight? She died seasons ago, didn't she?"

I took a deep breath before answering the she-cat, actually needing to think about my words for the first time since we'd left the secluded clearing. Now, I had given her all of the background that she needed, which now allowed me to tell her exactly what all of it meant.

This is it. After all of this time...

I took a step forward, keeping my gaze calm as I looked back at Snowstorm. "Her body died... but her soul didn't," I meowed clearly. "It still lingers here, Snowstorm, just as strongly as it did when Snowflight herself carried it."

I then watched as Snowstorm's eyes slowly began to widen as I went on, lightly brushing my tail along her flank. "Someone else carries it now."

And with those words, Snowstorm's gaze seemed to completely wash over with wonder and complete astonishment.

I simply watched, my fur tingling as a chill ran down my spine.

She understood now. I was sure of it.

After several heartbeats, she then closed her eyes and slowly lowered her head to the ground. "Someone else, huh?" she murmured.

She then lifted her head back up, meeting my gaze once again. "I... I'm that someone else, aren't I?"

"Yes, Snowstorm," I replied, my voice thick with the emotion that had been welling up inside of me. "And these dreams of yours have been trying to tell you just that." I then padded up closer to the she-cat and wrapped my tail around her back. "Snowflight has returned to ThunderClan through you, Snowstorm, and I know that with complete certainty." *And now you know as well.*

I then sighed as I lifted my head to look around the clearing we were sitting in. "You are meant to fulfill the destiny that she never could," I forced out, my voice growing continuously more hoarse and taut with each word I said. "And part of that, I know you have already done."

Snowstorm flicked her ears, her eyes still wide. "You do?"

I actually managed a purr of amusement as I replied to the she-cat. "Don't think that I had simply brushed over your mentioning of your dreams in the Dark Forest, Snowstorm," I meowed to her as I recalled what I had learned in just the past few moons - the moment that my son had become himself again. "I know what you did to help Swiftflight."

"So... that was something that I was being called to do!" Snowstorm exclaimed as she gave a lash of her tail. "That was all a part of Snowflight's destiny?"

"Jayfeather and I think so," I answered the she-cat, giving her a shrug. I then hesitated a bit before my next words, as they scared me just as much as they would Snowstorm. "And... we unfortunately also think that that wasn't the extent of it. I also know, Snowstorm,

that the dreams you're having probably aren't just of the Dark Forest in general, are they?"

I then turned completely to face Snowstorm again. "There's a specific cat haunting your mind, and I think I know which one," I muttered through gritted teeth. "The one that killed Snowflight?"

Snowstorm gave a slow nod, her eyes growing dark. "The one that killed Snowflight..." she murmured. "...and the one that manipulated Swiftflight for so many moons... Great StarClan, how I wish that I could sink my claws into his mangy gray fur..." She then shook her head quickly as if to pull herself out of her own anger. "I've always thought that I'd been dreaming of him... and that place, because I'd been reliving what I went through there. But... why am I really?"

Ah, the question that's been on my mind for months. "I hate to say it, but I don't know, Snowstorm. I don't know at all," I answered the warrior, not being to push down my panic at having to show her any uncertainty following what I had just revealed to her. "All I know is that it is all laying down a path for your destiny, and Snowflight is waiting for you to fulfill it."

"And fulfill it, I will."

Yet another chill ran down my spine at Snowstorm's bold words, words that had been spoken with absolutely no hesitation at all. In fact, the white she-cat hadn't seemed to have shown even one bit of fear since hearing the truth.

In fact, I didn't think I had ever seen her look so much at ease. "You're not scared?" was the first thing that I could think to ask through my amazement.

"Oh, I'm scared out of my mind!" Snowstorm replied with a snort, shaking her head. "But who wouldn't be, if they were in charge of a mission as big and important as this?"

She then took a deep breath. "But despite my fear, I don't think I've ever felt so relieved at the same time. All of the dreams, the ways in which I think and the way I see things... it all makes sense now," she went on. "I never knew Snowflight, obviously, but now... I can

almost *feel* her determination that's been strong in her soul since she died. I've always felt it, but never knew what it meant, but..."

I then nearly let out a gasp as Snowstorm stood up, and the strangest glowing wave rippled through her whole body. For a moment, her pelt seemed to shimmer like the stars of Silverpelt, and I felt my sister's presence as strongly as I ever had. "Now I'm ready," she meowed, clearly not having noticed what I'd seen at all. "I'm ready for whatever this destiny asks of me."

I barely had the time to process what I had just witnessed, as just a heartbeat later, I heard several loud and quick pawsteps heading our way from deeper into the forest. Snowstorm and I exchanged a nervous, confused glance before flanking each other and facing the noise.

And, as I had expected, we were facing a ThunderClan patrol, heading right towards us. Thornclaw was at the front, with Brightheart, Dustystorm and Emberpaw just behind him.

They all abruptly came to a stop once they arrived into the bramble clearing. "Goldenshine!" my father exclaimed after letting out a relieved, exhausted sigh. "There you are!"

I couldn't help but let out a snort of amusement. *Apparently everyone is looking for me today,* I joked before quickly running up to meet Thornclaw. "Father? What's going on?"

My heart began to pound as I almost instantly noticed the worried, dismayed look in my father's pale blue eyes. "Have you seen your mother?" he then asked as he began to frantically flit his eyes around the forest. "She fell a bit behind me and the kits when we were in the Twolegplace, promising that she'd be just a bit longer returning to camp, but she still hasn't returned."

My heart then began to pound even faster. "Oh, no," I whispered. "Could she just be having some trouble getting back?"

"That's what I would have liked to think," Thornclaw muttered. "I got a patrol together to see if we'd possibly just run into Lilypetal in our territory making her way back, but she's nowhere in sight, and

the only scent we can find of her is the one that she trailed as we left for the Twolegplace." I then watched as Thornclaw shut his eyes for a moment, as if he could barely stand the amount of anxiety he felt, and was trying to hide it. "You haven't seen her at all?"

"No, I haven't," I replied truthfully. "Snowstorm and I have been all around ThunderClan's territory, and we haven't seen any sign of Lilypetal."

Emberpaw, who was standing right next to Thornclaw, let out a horrified gasp and then pressed up against her father. "No!" she cried. I then watched sadly as Thornclaw wrapped his tail around her back as my younger sister dug her head into his fur. *I have to admit that I'm almost tempted to do the same...*

I then shifted my gaze over as Brightheart padded up to stand on Thornclaw's other side. "You all had gone to the Twolegplace so that Lilypetal's brother could see the kits, right?" she asked her brother. "Maybe she's just gotten caught up in speaking with him. They are siblings that barely get to see each other, after all!"

Although Brightheart's words actually brought me some reassurance, Thornclaw didn't seem comforted by them at all, and immediately shook his head. "Despite that, I know that Lilypetal wouldn't let herself be in the Twolegplace for this long," the golden tabby murmured as she stared straight ahead. "She'd be back by now if she had control over it."

Although Thornclaw's words weren't nearly as consoling, they were unfortunately the ones that made more sense. I exchanged an anxious glance with Dustystorm, who had padded up to stand on Emberpaw's other side. "Uh, oh," he meowed. He then shifted his gaze to look at my father. "Thornclaw... then, it sounds like..."

My mate then trailed off, clearly too reluctant to go on. So, I finished his words for him as my gaze locked with Thornclaw's. "Lilypetal's miss-"

Thornclaw immediately shut his eyes, raising his tail as if to ask for silence. "I don't need to hear it," he meowed sharply. He then quickly turned and nodded to my mate. "Dustystorm, go back to

camp with Emberpaw and fetch a couple more warriors."

My father then turned to face me. "Goldenshine, Snowstorm - you can join us as well," he meowed, and my pelt brushed his as I ran up to join the patrol, and he padded ahead, pausing after a few pawsteps as he stared off into the forest, the moonlight turning his golden brown pelt silver. "We're going to the Twolegplace."

Chapter 22

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

"Swiftflight?"

Even though my own name was being called, it barely seemed to make it into my own ears.

"Swiftflight!"

I then blinked and nearly took a step back when my vision was suddenly filled with nothing but dark ginger fluff. And after shaking my head quickly and finally pulling myself out of my own head, I realized that Foxleap, my former mentor, was waving his tail in my face.

"Hello?" He was meowing to me. "Swiftflight, are you there?"

I held back a frustrated hiss and quickly used one of my paws to push Foxleap's tail away. "I'm here," I finally replied to the tom. I then took a deep breath and flashed him an apologetic look. "Sorry, Foxleap." *But I'd prefer it if you keep your tail on... and out of my face!*

The ginger tom let out an exhausted huff and rolled his eyes in response. "Great StarClan, did that take a while!" He breathed. "I might as well have been trying to get a rock's attention!"

I tilted my head to the side and flashed my former mentor a confused, skeptical look. "But... rocks aren't living, Foxleap."

"Exactly!" Foxleap replied, shaking his head slowly as his eyes glowed with amazement and humor. "Whatever was keeping your attention made you a seem as good as dead when I was calling your name." He then lightly poked my shoulder with his tail and gave me an inquiring look. "Which was...?"

I narrowed my eyes back at the tom, genuinely confused. "Which

was... what?"

Foxleap then let out a small purr of amusement, clearly humored by my haziness. "What was this thing so desperately asking for your attention?"

I flicked my ears as my fur began to bristle with discomfort and nerves. I found that I had no idea how to answer that question. I had an answer, but I wasn't sure if it was anything I wanted to share with my former mentor. "Oh..." I murmured, taking a quick glance at the same place that I had been staring at in my daze just moments ago. I then looked back towards Foxleap and lowered my head to the ground, my heart sinking. "Nothing, Foxleap."

I then screwed my eyes shut and pushed back my own sadness. *Great StarClan, that is such a lie...*

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Foxleap flashing me a brief concerned look before lifting his head to follow where my gaze had gone to a heartbeat earlier. "Nothing, huh?" I heard him murmur after a moment. I then forced myself to look back up at him, and almost immediately regretted it as I met his smug, knowing gaze. "*Nothing* wouldn't happen to be collecting moss over by that tree, would it?" He murmured, lashing his tail as if to gesture to something.

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh, my heart filling up with sorrow yet again as I looked back over to where Foxleap had pointed to, which was where Cherrypaw was currently deep in concentration as she gathered moss off of a fallen tree.

As I had unfortunately predicted, Foxleap had been able to see right through everything I had been trying to hide – the fact that I had been staring at Cherrypaw, and the fact that she was something keeping my attention.

And not to mention, a cat that currently hurt my heart, reminding me of a certain horrible reality every time I looked at her.

But there was no way in the name of StarClan that Foxleap was going to know that. "Funny," I simply muttered in response,

avoiding Foxleap's gaze.

Despite me trying to dodge the subject, he further pushed on, taking a step closer to me. "Well, am I wrong?" He prompted.

Strangely enough, I could only sigh and close my eyes in response to that question. While Foxleap trying to probe into my thoughts would usually be something that I'd be incredibly frustrated with, I found that this time, I was too overwhelmed with completely different feelings now.

I mean, the dark ginger warrior had been correct - I had been staring at Cherrypaw, and nothing but her for only StarClan knows how long, and thank StarClan themselves that she hadn't noticed, or she would have surely questioned ever having any sort of relationship with me at all.

But I couldn't help it. In fact, I didn't even realize that I was doing it most of the time. *Which makes all of this so much harder!* I thought to myself. *Seeing Cherrypaw only further reminds me of the fact that I can't go up and speak with her, otherwise Poppyfrost might claw my eyes out.* I then had to suppress letting out an exasperated hiss right in front of Foxleap. *Why? Why is this having to happen? Poppyfrost was right to judge my past, but I'm changing! I would never, ever hurt Cherrypaw, or let anything else hurt her. For StarClan's sake, I'd hate to see anything bad happen to Cherrypaw as much as Poppyfrost does! Why can't Poppyfrost bother to try and see that?*

I then let out a sigh as another thought crossed my mind. *What if she never does? What will I do then?*

I then shook my head and forced myself out of my thoughts, as they had been pretty much relapsing in my mind over and over since that terrible, terrible day at the fresh-kill pile. Thinking of them over and over wasn't doing anything good for me. Yet, each time I tried to push them away, they always seemed to push back more strongly.

But I attempted to push them away as I brought my attention back to Foxleap, who seemed to be looking over at Cherrypaw's direction once again, and he then looked back at me, his gaze still smug, but

just a bit more sympathetic now. "Swiftflight is padding after a she-cat, I see..." he murmured. He then let out a purr of amusement before going on. "What's the problem? A tom as handsome as you should have *no* problem, for StarClan's sake!"

Great StarClan, how I wish it were that easy, I thought as I took yet another glance over at Cherrypaw, who was now beginning to make her way towards the medicine den, moss in her jaws. Her ginger fur looked absolutely beautiful, almost silver, as it reflected against the moonlight. She was trotting so gracefully, so light on her paws. The little skip that she always had it her step was absolutely adorable to me. And my heart managed to feel a small twinge of warmth as I caught a glimpse of her amber eyes that glowed with eagerness to complete her task. I then closed my eyes as I felt another immense wave of grief and pain, one so big that I couldn't even find the words to respond to Foxleap's teasing.

Which is why I was so incredibly thankful when he changed the subject. "But anyway, as I was *attempting* to do earlier," the ginger tom began, "I was wondering if you'd like to join the border patrol I'm leading with Ivypool and Toadstep. We're checking over the WindClan border to make sure that those mouse-brains aren't going to cause us any more trouble for now."

I then watched as my former mentor's gaze then washed over with unease as he began to shift his paws back and forth. "And anyway, Firestar and Brambleclaw want a decent amount of cats out in the forest with Lilypetal missing."

I flicked my ears and felt my stomach twist up into a knot as I recalled the situation that had arisen in ThunderClan since the sun had set. Just the faintest amount of sun had still been lighting up the camp as Thornclaw had returned to camp from the Twolegplace with Emberpaw, Wrenpaw, and Lightningpaw... *without* Lilypetal with them. When Firestar had questioned the golden brown tabby, my kin had claimed, a bit nervously, that Lilypetal was just a bit behind them.

But it had become clear quite quickly that Thornclaw's words weren't actually the case at all, and he had urgently formed a small search patrol for the brown-and-white tabby she-cat, just as the

moon was rising.

Just a bit after the search party had left, Dustystorm and Emberpaw had burst into camp, announcing to everyone that was in camp that Lilypetal was confirmed to not be anywhere on ThunderClan territory. After many gasps of alarm had erupted among the clearing, Brambleclaw had quickly sent Cloudtail and Spiderleg to return to the search patrol with Dustystorm and Emberpaw.

And now, all of ThunderClan was anxiously awaiting their return. And hopefully, Lilypetal was going to be with them. When my thoughts weren't consumed by... *certain things*, I was sending them all the prayers that I could, desperate to see my kin and mother's mother see her home again.

But just now, I couldn't help but feel a bit of bitterness as my eyes fell on a certain tortoiseshell pelt, just as Foxleap had given me his invitation to join his border patrol. And it unfortunately brought me to give him a bitter response as my anger and frustration towards Poppyfrost began to bubble up again. "You sure you're not worried that I'll accidentally claw you across the face, or maybe *influence* Ivypool or Toadstep enough to maybe start a border brawl just for kicks?" I muttered to Foxleap through gritted teeth, not even looking at him as my fur began to bristle.

I looked back at my former mentor to see that he was staring back at me in alarm. "Swiftflight, what in the name of StarClan are you talking about?"

I took a deep breath and shook my head, knowing that to Foxleap, my words would only sound creepy and weird without any context. "Nothing," I muttered. I then stood up and gave the ginger tom a hard gaze. "And this time, I really do mean nothing."

I then sighed in annoyance as Foxleap's eyes lit up, and his whiskers began to twitch. "Oh, *this* time?" He exclaimed, his tail beginning to twitch. "So that means that earlier-"

"I'll come on patrol, Foxleap," I muttered sharply, cutting my former mentor off as quickly as I could.

Foxleap only gave the briefest concerned glance before nodding. "Great," he replied as he then looked over to where Ivypool and Toadstep were talking anxiously by the camp entrance, and then back to me, his gaze more solemn. "Let's go."

I then proceeded to follow just behind Foxleap as he quickly padded ahead and beckoned Ivypool and Toadstep over with his tail. Just as the four of us were about to make our way through the gorse tunnel that led out to the forest, I made the terrible choice of deciding to look back and seek a certain ginger pelt one last time.

I immediately found Cherrypaw as she was leaving the medicine den. She seemed to be meowing a farewell back at Leafpool, and she then proceeded to let out a sigh, take a few pawsteps forward and settle down in a comfortable spot. Her gaze was unreadable as she then looked up at the stars of Silverpelt, and I wished more than anything that I could turn around, press my pelt against hers, breath in her sweet scent, and look up at those stars with her.

But I knew that I couldn't, and I still couldn't understand why that was such a painful thought for me. I let out a frustrated hiss as I then forced my head back around. *Why does this hurt me so much?* I asked myself as I crawled through the camp entrance, truly baffled by my own actions and feelings. *I mean, why can't I just get over this? Why can't I live with the fact that Poppyfrost wants Cherrypaw and I to stay apart?*

I then shook my head quickly and lifted up my chin as I made it out into the forest. I can't focus on that right now, I tried to tell myself. Or rather, I won't focus on that right now.

The night creatures were certainly in their prime, chirping, squeaking, and crying out in the forest, making what should be typically be the most peaceful time of day quite chaotic, as greenleaf typically made that a completely different case.

For the first few moments in our travel, Foxleap, Ivypool, Toadstep and I were completely silent as we padded cautiously though the trees, our eyes and ears wide open as we all surely searched for the same thing - our missing Clanmate. I could almost sense the frustration among all four of us as their seemed to be no recent

indications of Lilypetal anywhere. *No, no, no...*

Then, as we got closer to the WindClan border, I could hear Foxleap and Toadstep beginning to nervously whisper to each other, almost as if to distract themselves from the frightening reality that a beloved Clanmate wasn't anywhere in sight, and not anywhere in her own territory.

I looked ahead towards the two toms for just a moment before shifting my gaze over to Ivypool, who I actually found was looking back at me, and who seemed to be slowing her pace in order to walk side by side with me. Luckily, her warm gaze managed to ease my worries just the smallest bit. "Hey, Swiftpaw," she murmured to me, giving me a small flick on the ear with her tail.

I flashed her a humored, confused look. "Excuse me, I don't know if you're just really, *really* slow..." I murmured to her. "But Swiftpaw became a warrior a few moons ago."

The silver-and-white she-cat purred with amusement as she gave me a nudge. "I know. I'm just teasing," she meowed, her voice full of laughter. "But honestly, sometimes I do still see you as a little apprentice. I can hardly comprehend you as being anything more than that, but you're growing up so fast now!" She then took a pawstep away from me, her eyes wide and amused as she looked at me from head to paws. "I mean, you're taller than me now. When did that happen?"

For a moment, I simply stared back at Ivypool, my gaze half-annoyed and half-humored. *Another reason why a relationship between the two of us would have never worked,* I realized as I looked back at her. *She always treated me as an equal when I wasn't treating her like a jerk, yet... the fact that I'm a little younger than she is would probably cause her to never completely think of us like that.* "Geez," I then sighed in response to the she-cat, rolling my eyes. "So, did you just come over here to tease me, or is there something else you wanted to talk about?"

Ivypool sniffed. "Well, *Swiftflight*," she began to reply, "luckily for you, it's the latter."

"Wow, you are so kind as to finally call me by my name," I meowed sarcastically before flashing Ivypool a concerned glance, my curiosity actually well-covering up my sadness and worry for the moment. "So, what's going on?"

Ivypool immediately let out a sigh, her eyes seeming to cloud over with exhaustion as she tried to answer me. "Well... a lot, actually," she breathed. I was then surprised to see her eyes narrow, and her gaze glint with teasing as she looked back at me. "Wait, I suppose that I should ask this first - is it okay to talk to you about the Dark Forest?"

For a moment, I was utterly shocked and confused by the question. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Ivypool slowly broke her gaze from mine so that she could look ahead. "Hm... well, I do seem to remember a certain dark gray tom named Swiftpaw telling me to never bring up the Dark Forest to him again..." she replied wryly. "I know that said Swiftpaw isn't affiliated with said Dark Forest anymore, but I had no idea if-"

"Alright, alright. I get it, Ivypool," I muttered, raising my tail. "Swiftpaw was an idiot. We both know that." I then pulled back from my slightly teasing, sarcastic tone, still determined to find out what Ivypool was wanting to say to me. And knowing that the silver warrior was actually a spy for the Dark Forest, meant that whatever she had to say was probably going to be quite interesting. "Swift*flight* would like to know what you have to say about the Dark Forest."

Ivypool flashed me a brief amused glance before taking a deep breath. "Okay, well... the thing is, Lionblaze and Jayfeather are the two cats that I usually bring all of my information to, but..." she began. "For once, I'd like to be able to talk about the Dark Forest without my words being used for any sort of... *plan*, you know? I need to speak with someone about it who's experienced it in the same way that I have. Especially now, when things are not looking good at all..."

A shiver ran down my spine at Ivypool's words. "But... are they ever looking good?" I asked anxiously.

"I suppose not," Ivypool replied. "But... right now, it's just... awful. With each night that I'm there, their grudge against the Clans seems to grow stronger, and it becomes even more clear that these cats are just using our Clanmates to help them get what they want. I mean, you and I both always knew that... yet, these cats seem to be blinded by what they're trying to prove to their Clans by training there." She then closed her eyes and let out a sigh. "There are so many traitors among us, Swiftflight."

I felt an uncomfortable, nervous pang in my head with Ivypool's words, certain cats quickly coming to my head - Breezepelt, my father, who was now clearly so blinded by hatred and a need to prove himself that he would hurt any cat needed in order to do so. *And I absolutely hated to put any other cat in that category, but I couldn't help but think that every single Clan cat in the Dark Forest clearly was just as blind as Breezepelt if they truly believed that these Dark Forest spirits were simply trying to help them. I know what it is like to be blinded by a need to want to be the best, or to prove something to those around you. It can make you crazy,* I thought to myself worriedly. *Great StarClan, so many cats...*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts so that I could further listen to Ivypool. "And that on it's own is scary enough, but what is even more creepy to me is the fact that Tigerstar..." she then went on, just before flashing me a nervous glance. "And... Ashfur..."

My eyes instantly widened with that name, and I gave Ivypool the smallest nod to prompt her to go on.

And that she did. "The two of them have been really making themselves scarce lately," the she-cat explained. "I've barely seen them in the past couple of quarter moons."

My eyes slowly began to narrow down into slits. "Have they, now?"

Ivypool turned to look at me, and I met her fearful, uncertain blue eyes. "Oh, yeah," she breathed to me as she nodded. "I mean, I haven't seen Ashfur much at all since you left the Dark Forest, and that's creepy enough, but the fact that Tigerstar has disappeared along with him makes it even more so."

"Wow, no kidding..." I murmured as I processed Ivypool's troubling words. And although I didn't say it out loud, I was completely creeped out by that, and I knew that it was definitely going to be something, among everything else, that I would bring up the next time Goldenshine, Thornclaw, Lilypetal and I met up - *and StarClan grant that Lilypetal will be with us next time!*

I mean, I knew very well of what Ashfur and Tigerstar were capable of, and that was just based off of how they had treated *me*. So, I couldn't even begin to imagine what they could do beyond that. It was almost *inconceivable*. "So... it definitely sounds like the tension is rising in the Dark Forest, huh?" I then asked Ivypool nervously.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Ivypool sighed before giving me an almost relieved, reassuring look. "Be thankful that you left, Swiftflight."

I flicked my ears back at the she-cat, slightly confused by her statement. *Does she want me to be thankful because I don't have to endure the harshness of training there anymore? Or...* I wondered. *Or does she want me to be thankful because if I had stayed, I would have become just as blind as these other Clan cats?*

I didn't have much time to ponder the question, as Ivypool cut off my thoughts. "And you know something else very strange that I've noticed?"

I simply raised my eyebrows back at the silver-and-white she-cat and nodded to her, wondering what she could possibly have to say to top what she already had.

So, I actually felt a nervous pang in my stomach as Ivypool began to speak again. "Believe or not..." she began to murmur. "I think that one night I actually saw Lilypetal - speaking to Tigerstar and Ashfur themselves!"

For a moment, I actually wondered if I had just been hearing things. Maybe all of the different thoughts spiraling in my mind had all collided, thus resulting in an explosion of completely outrageous words being put back inside of it. "*What?*" I exclaimed back at Ivypool. "Are you sure?" *I'd believe that Firestar would become*

Tigerstar's ally before I'd believe that!

"Well... I suppose I can't be completely sure..." Ivypool pondered as she flashed me a distraught, sympathetic look. "But I'm pretty sure that's what I saw."

And I'm pretty sure that this is all a load of mouse-droppings! "What was she doing?" I pressed to Ivypool. "You said that she was speaking to them?"

"From what I could tell," Ivypool replied. "But I haven't seen her training in the Dark Forest at all, so I can't possibly begin to guess why she would be there. Isn't that strange?" When I didn't answer immediately, she proceeded to ask me another question, seemingly wanting to know the answers to them as much as I did. "You're her kin, Swiftflight - what do you think?"

"I honestly have no idea," I answered out of my complete bewilderment. And truthfully, as Ivypool had said, I couldn't even begin to guess why Lilypetal would be in the Dark Forest on her own accord. Or, what I assumed to be on her own accord.

I then shook my head quickly and let out a huff, almost immediately concluding that Ivypool must have just been seeing things. *That would honestly make more sense. Lilypetal would most definitely be one of the last cats I'd predict would be training in the Dark Forest, or associating herself with Ashfur at that! It wouldn't make any sense,* I thought. *And I know that Lilypetal wasn't lying about what she told Goldenshine, Thornclaw and me. Right? Right.*

And I now had to have these new thoughts of my kin fresh in my head as we continued to keep an eye out for her in our travel to the WindClan border. There still had been no sign of her at all once we had marked our borders along the stream and had begun to head back to ThunderClan.

We had just passed by the training hollow when we actually bumped into a second patrol - one that Brambleclaw had apparently sent out as a back-up search party - Whitewing was at the front, and was leading Birchfall, Sandstorm... and my heart nearly skipped a beat as I noticed Cherrypaw just behind the pale ginger she-cat.

My heart began to beat faster, and I felt my stomach twist up with excitement as our patrol quickly padded up to meet the arriving one. I already knew that our encounter would be brief, but I figured that now would be the perfect time to actually get to speak with Cherrypaw while Poppyfrost wasn't around. I would hopefully just get to say "hi", or get to see how she was doing. And once I met Cherrypaw's amber gaze, and saw her eyes light up, I felt even more compelled to make the attempt.

And I was just beginning to make my way towards her, when I suddenly felt my paws almost stop on their own, and I felt myself having to hold back a growl.

Poppyfrost had finally made her presence known, emerging from behind her daughter to flank her, her hostile gaze locked on me as she did so. For a moment, I almost didn't want to let the older she-cat's intimidation get to me, and continue to walk up to Cherrypaw and speak to her as if her mother wasn't there. And if not that, I'd walk straight up to the tortoiseshell she-cat and yowl at her all of the angry, frustrating thoughts that she had caused to swirl around in my head *constantly*.

But I didn't, and instead slowly began to take pawsteps backwards as I stared with narrowed eyes back at Poppyfrost. And by the time I had returned to my patrol, I found that I was absolutely shocked by what I had just done. I mean, was I out of my mind? I had been just about to possibly run up to a Clanmate and scold her in front of several other Clanmates, and anyways, we were on patrol, for StarClan's sake! I couldn't disappoint the other cats by letting myself be so distracted. That should've been obvious to me.

Yet, I still felt a strong, horrible tug as I then watched Cherrypaw and Poppyfrost pad away with Whitewing's patrol, and I felt my heart sink as Cherrypaw looked back at me, her eyes full of concern and disappointment. I still felt the impulse to chase after her, and tell her that this wasn't how I wanted things to be.

But I still stayed put, feeling overwhelmed and... *wrong* as I then saw Cherrypaw's ginger tail then disappear into the darkness.

Then, as Foxleap continued to lead us back to camp, I almost felt

like I needed to go to the medicine den from this strange feeling that I felt, this weird emotion that I felt whenever it occurred to me that Cherrypaw was being kept from me, and that I would never get to see her.

I then looked over at Ivypool, who I was walking side by side with. *When Ivypool was angry with me for refusing to spy with her, I remember being so upset at the fact that she was acting so coldly towards me,* I recalled. *I hated the fact that she was so disappointed in me...*

I then let out an exasperated sigh. But why didn't that feel as difficult as this? I wondered. *The pain of not being close to Ivypool was tough, sure, but Cherrypaw... not being close to her feels as painful as a physical wound, and it feels like there isn't a thing any medicine cat could do to help it...*

I then paused once I had crawled through the gorse tunnel and into camp, having to stop to gather my thoughts. *And all of this is even managing to make me forget about the Dark Forest situation,* I realized, continuing to be bewildered by my own behavior. *I mean, Ivypool bringing it up tonight was the first time I'd thought about it for days.*

I let out a long sigh, and then began to shake my head slowly as I padded groggily over to the warriors den. *Great StarClan, what's* wrong *with me?*

Chapter 23

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"Come on!"

Although my spirits was still fairly high, my physical strength was beginning to falter as I used my flank to shove a box across the sturdy floor. "Keep moving..." I urged, for some reason thinking that my words would encourage the inanimate object.

And... I then let out an exhausted huff as I finally felt the large object touch the wall. "There!"

I then backed up a few pawsteps, crouched down low, and then proceeded to leap up to the top of the box. Once I had steadied my landing, I glanced up at the wooden planks just above me and took the chance at another successful leap.

My forelegs were just barely able to grab hold of them, but it was luckily enough for me to be able to haul the rest of my body up and to safety. I then quickly whipped myself around, feeling a wave of determination as my eyes fell on the small, round object just a bit ahead of me, attached to the tall, looming glass door that could end my current confinement.

At least, I really, really hoped.

My gaze still set straight on the doorknob, I made another leap forward, my forelegs outstretched, and then felt a wave of satisfaction as my paws met the cold, metal object. I let it take all of my weight, in the hopes that it would fall down with me.

But the knob only made a small clicking noise, and stayed put.

I let out a hiss of annoyance. "Ugh! Great StarClan almighty!" I growled as I let myself fall to the ground. "Why do Twolegs keep all

of their gosh-darn doors locked?"

For a moment, I simply continued to lie on the tiled floor, waiting for my frustration to simmer. But seeing the smug, amused look that was in front of me was making that a little difficult.

This cat, a fluffy white she-cat with a flat face - who's name I couldn't remember to save my life - padded up to me and sat down just a few tail-lengths away. "No luck?" she mewed, her voice slightly mocking as she tilted her head to the side.

I held back another hiss as I stood up to face her. "Does it look like I've had luck?"

What's-her-face's eyes widened, and she took a step back. "Feisty..." she murmured, taking a glance at me from head to paws.

I then let out a sigh and closed my eyes, my patience being greatly tested at the moment. "Look, I'm just trying to get out of here, if that wasn't already clear," I murmured, beginning to scan my eyes around the area as I lashed my tail back and forth anxiously. *And Twoleg nests are just as difficult to escape from as I remember...*

Although it had barely been one night since the Twolegs had snatched me up and plopped me into their nest, it truly felt as if I had already spent an endless amount of seasons trying to find my way out of it.

Thank StarClan they hadn't put me into any sort of cage, which would basically guarantee no escape. But I honestly might as well have been in one by how trapped I still felt. *They could put me into the biggest, most colossal nest that they have, and I'd still feel trapped...*

Luckily, almost as soon as the Twolegs had brought me here, they had actually left me to do what I assumed was sleep, which was giving me the perfect opportunity to try and find my way out without them trying to stop me.

But if it wasn't obvious already, I was having a lot of trouble - the doorknob I had just attempted being the last one of the den that I knew of.

And this she-cat, what's-her-face, along with a tom, what's-his-name, had simply been watching, humored, as I'd frantically wandered around the house and tried to find a way to escape.

What's-his-name, a fluffy black and white tom with yellow eyes, were clearly gleaming with amusement as he padded up to stand beside what's-her-face and watched me leap up to a window and try to tamper with it. "But why would you want to get out of here?" he called up to me in response to my answer to his friend. "These housefolk are so nice! They take in any stray cat that they find wandering around the streets."

I briefly paused my mission to look down at the tom. "I'm not a stray," I corrected him sharply.

"Then where are you from?"

"Well, I'm a wild cat," I tried to answer the tom more calmly as I turned back towards the window. "I live in the forest down by the lake."

I then heard the she-cat let out a snort. "So, a stray," she murmured complacently.

I'd shut that snarky, smug mouth of yours before I have a go at it myself... I thought as I closed my eyes momentarily and took a deep breath, my patience still running low, before turning to look at the two cats once again. I then nodded to the fluffy white she-cat. "Remind me of your name again?"

She actually took a tiny pawstep back, and exchanged a slightly bewildered, intimidated glance with her friend. "Mae..." she murmured in reply.

"Okay, well, Mae..." I began as I leapt down from my current window and then up to another. "I am not a stray. I live in the forest with many other cats. We all hunt for each other and defend our territory whenever need be. We work together, and everything we do is to help and benefit each other."

I then went back onto all-fours as I found myself suddenly

overwhelmed with a sense of loss, one I had been subconsciously trying to ignore since I'd gotten here - everything that I had been leaving behind as soon as the Twoleg's paws my fur. "It's truly an amazing life..." I whispered, so quietly that I wondered if the two cats below me even heard. "Strays aren't lucky enough to have the life that I have..."

I then shook my head quickly, feeling another rush of persistence as I whipped myself back around to mess with the window yet again. "Which is why I have to get back!" I then meowed more loudly, the dismay probably clear in my voice. *What in the name of StarClan would I do if I were to be trapped here forever?* I asked myself, barely being able to stand that thought. *All of cats I'd never get to see again - all of my Clanmates, Thornclaw, the kits... I'd never get to serve as a warrior for as long as I live, or train one of Sorreltail and Brackenfur's kits...*

I then screwed my eyes shut as I tried to shield my rising emotion. *All of it... so far away in the forest...* I thought with sorrow.

I then flicked my ears with alarm. *And what about the Dark Forest? Ashfur... and Tigerstar... their proposition! I'll never get to-*

What's-his-name cut me off from my panicked thoughts. "Seems like a waste of energy to me," I heard him meow from the floor below. "Why would any cat be so determined to go back out into the wild?" His gaze stayed on me as I then made my way to the kitchen window. "You said that you used to be like us, right? What in your right mind made you think that leaving your housefolk would be a good idea?"

I broke my gaze from the window and gave the black and white cat a hard stare. "Goose, right?"

"Gus."

"Right, sorry," I muttered, then proceeding to raise my chin up just slightly. "Gus, I left because I knew in my heart that there was something better out there." I then sighed, feeling a slight twinge of regret as I lowered my head. "I *always* knew, but I unfortunately had to ignore it for a while."

I then turned back around towards the window and made an attempt at shifting one of the panels. "But then I learned that I needed to ignore cats like you," I went on. "Their words held me back."

I heard Gus snort from behind me. "Held you back from sleeping on dirt and eating tufts of fur and bones for meals?"

Giving up on yet another window, I turned around and swiftly leaped down onto the cold floor. "Sure," I replied, walking in between Gus and Mae as I made my way back towards the last door I had attempted to open. "I was able to get away from eating food that looks like rabbit-droppings and spending my days rolling in the grass and staring at walls for fun."

I then screwed my eyes shut for another brief moment. *I'm sorry, Oreo. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Oreo.*

I glanced back at Mae and Gus to see them exchanging a confused glance. "Where are you going?" Mae called out to me.

I settled down once I had arrived to the door, which was made of glass with a wooden border, giving me a great view of the nest's yard and even a bit of the area beyond. "I'm going to sleep," I answered the fluffy she-cat, knowing that I unfortunately had to give up in my mission for the moment.

As strange as it maybe would sound to some, I figured that it would maybe be better to try and sleep things off. I would figure out what I needed to do once I woke up, not while I was in this tired, absolutely exhausted, angry and emotional state.

And the Twolegs being awake the nest morning actually would possibly make things easier for me to escape than when they were sleeping, I realized. *They'll maybe let me outside, and I can leap over that fence, no problem!*

I then sighed as I tried to adjust into a more comfortable position. *And I'll need to have the strength to do that,* I tried to tell myself, despite still feeling extremely antsy at the thought of not looking for another escape route for the moment.

"Going to sleep? Right next to the door on that cold, hard floor?" Gus then asked, his eyes wide with genuine shock.

"Yeah, why aren't you sleeping in a bed?" Mae added on. "It's much more comfy!"

I scooted a little closer towards the glass and continued to stare through it, my heart welling up with longing. "Having a view of the outside and the sky and stars above brings me more comfort than one of those cat beds ever could."

I then finally decided to lower my head down over my paws. "Goodnight, Mae and Gus."

I briefly flicked my gaze over to the kittypets to find them exchanging yet another bemused glance. "Goodnight..." Gus murmured.

The two cats then turned around, and I watched as Mae leaned over to whisper in Gus's ear as they flanked each other and walked off. "She is the weirdest cat that I've ever seen!" she hissed to him, and I wonder if she almost had *wanted* me to hear that.

Their whispers then became inaudible as they made their way towards their cat bed. Once the had both stepped into the soft, nest-like object, they lied down and curled up together. Gus then wrapped his tail around Mae and gave her a quick lick on the head.

Honestly, I couldn't help but think that this was cute. Unless they were just incredibly close friends, I was pretty much able to deduce that these two were mates, and if not that, on the way to it. *Aww, and they just happened to find each other by these Twolegs bringing the both of them here,* I realized. *That's kind of sweet.*

But as I continued to look at the two cuddled up into their cat bed, I suddenly felt more sadness and longing welling up inside of me. *I could be curled up with Thornclaw in the warriors den right now...* I thought, instantly hating not being able to be pressed up against his golden brown tabby fur. *I miss him so much, Great StarClan... I wonder if he's realized that I haven't come back? Has anyone else? If he has, I sure hope that he isn't worrying himself crazy.*

I then let out a huff, telling myself that I couldn't worry about that right now; unfortunately, all of that was out of my control. After all, I hopefully wouldn't have to worry about what the Clan would do. I would be escaping tomorrow, and I was certain of that. *I mean, surely a rescue patrol couldn't be put together this quickly? I'm going to have to count on doing this myself.*

I then readjusted myself once more, laying on my side so that I was staring straight out of the glass door. And for a moment, I felt as if I were back in the forest, lying on the grassy ground as I stared up at Silverpelt. *Goodnight, Thornclaw. I love you. And goodnight all of my sweet kits - Goldenshine, Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw, Lightningpaw, and Snowflight too... please don't worry about your mother. She's going to be back before you can say "badger-ride".*

I then lifted my head just slightly. *And Mistpelt...* I went on, continuing my internal good-nights. *Please send me strength... anything you can give me.*

I then lowered my head once more, and gradually let my eyes closed. *I love you all.*

And then, as I slowly began to drift off into sleep, I immediately began to wonder the types of dreams I would have tonight.

Unfortunately, I could automatically assumed that I couldn't reach the Dark Forest here. *I wish that I could,* I thought anxiously. *But I can't. Not so far from Clan territory.*

And surely enough, that's not where I "woke up". Instead, I was extremely confused to find myself in a yard in the back of a Twoleg nest. For a moment, I almost wondered if somehow the next day had already arrived, and I had somehow been able to make my way outside.

But I quickly realized that this wasn't the case - I recognized this yard, and it wasn't the yard of the nest I was trapped in.

This was my old friend Pansy's yard. It was small, but I always liked all of the flowers that surrounded its fences, and all of the creatures it brought along. So I, along with many other housecats, typically

liked to stop by there.

In this visit specifically, I found that I was sitting on top of the fence. *Shocker.*

And below me were Pansy, along with Apple and Dobby, the cats that lived just next to her. The three of them were all lying out in the sun in the grass. For whatever reason, all three of them were laughing as if I'd just fallen off of the fence, and onto my face.

I stared confusedly down at them through my past body, wondering what in the name of StarClan was going on in this moment I was reliving.

I watched as Pansy then rolled onto her side and stood up. "Oh my gosh, Lily," she purred, her voice still full of laughter. "You are hysterical!"

"Hysterical?" my kittypet self meowed, tilting her head to the side. "All I said was that I wished I could escape for a day and explore the forest!"

Pansy began to lash her tail from side to side. "Right!" she exclaimed, then tilting her head to the side. "And you'd be accomplishing... *what,* exactly?"

Apple only now seemed to be catching her breath from her laughing spell. "Hm..." she murmured, clearly pretending to ponder the question. "Maybe getting pummeled by wild cats, if anything."

Dobby continued to laugh as he laid on his back. "Or finding out just how quickly you can run away from them!"

I could practically sense my past irritation as all three cats burst into laughter again. "Oh, come on! You all make it sound like there'd be a bunch of creatures taller than trees with claws as long as twigs waiting for me out there!" I meowed to them. I then turned away from them and looked to the other side of the fence. "You all never wonder about what's beyond this neighborhood? Beyond any houses at all?"

I then broke my gaze from the trees ahead as I heard Apple snicker

behind me. "Well, sure," she replied. "And then I stop!"

I then let out a sigh, turning towards the Twoleg nest-less area ahead. "Wonderful..." I murmured under my breath.

Geez... I thought as I watched this scene unfold. *I haven't thought of these three cats* once *since I came to the Clans, and now I remember why.*

"Lily," Pansy then mewed, and I could see her padding up to the fence out of the corner of my eye. "You're not serious about that, are you?"

I glanced down at the cream she-cat, letting my gaze be a bit challenging as I raised a single eyebrow. "And what if I was?"

"I'd have your housefolk send you to the vet to get your head examined!" Dobby called out.

I briefly flashed him an annoyed glance, and simply rolled my eyes as my three kittypet friends erupted into laughter yet again. *Hm. Then I'd head on your way to talk to my housefolk right now, I suppose.*

When I didn't respond to Dobby's comment, Pansy let out a huff, and leaped up onto the fence to sit beside me. "Oh, come on, Lily," she meowed to me. Her voice was calm, but I could still barely hear the condescending tone beneath it. "This will probably blow over; you've always had too much curiosity and determination for your own good."

She then let out a snort and seemed to uncomfortably shift in her spot. "But I have to admit, I'm a bit worried for you and your housefolk to leave for the lake next moon," she went on, giving me a light nudge. "So close to the forest; nothing but the wild around you - you might slip right out of their paws!"

I didn't know it then, but Pansy honestly had all of the right to be worried, I realized, reflecting on this moment I had just witnessed - one that had happened just *days* before I left to stay in the greenleaf Twoleg nest that lied within Clan territory.

And my goodness, were Pansy, Apple and Dobby so wrong, but so

right at the same time. Yes, I did have too much determination, but it wasn't too much for my own good. I mean, it led me to the place that I currently called home. I hadn't let myself totally admit it, but I was completely serious about the words I had spoken to them, and I knew that even when I was being tested by their teasing words.

And that was exactly as I was doing now, except now I had gained the courage to act on all of it, and truly defy the taunting I was receiving. *I'm going to return to the wild without a single regret,* I said to my present-self. *I'm going to be out of this Twolegplace soon.*

Then, suddenly, I was broken out of my thoughts as I heard soft, rapid knocking noise, and I honestly couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Within my dream, I began to look around, wondering if Pansy's housefolk were maybe trying to get her attention from inside the house. I was curious as to why Pansy, Apple, or Dobby didn't seem to be acknowledging it, and even more so when I turned towards the Twoleg nest to see absolutely nothing behind me making noise.

And then, as the dream began to fade into nothingness, and the knocking didn't stop, I realized that it wasn't coming from my dream at all.

In fact, I was pretty much snapped awake with how loud it was becoming. I blinked just a couple of times before lifting my head and urgently looking around the den, still having no idea where the noise was coming from.

"Lilypetal!"

Oh my goodness...

My heart then nearly wanted to melt, hearing this voice that I immediately recognized. I stood up more quickly than I ever had in my entire life, my grogginess quickly disappearing through my excitement, and looked up at the kitchen window just a few fox-lengths away.

I practically felt numb with relief, disbelief and happiness as I

actually saw a certain tom's golden brown tabby pelt there. He was frantically knocking at the glass, peering down at me from the outside.

I nearly cried out my next words. "Thornclaw, oh my StarClan!" I exclaimed, leaping up onto the kitchen counter, and then up to the window. "Oh my goodness, you're here! I thought I was going to have to tear this nest down to escape, but you're here! Oh, you're here!"

"And so am I!"

I then saw another flash of golden brown, and I nearly let out another cry as Goldenshine leaped up to stand next to her father.

And just after her, came yet another golden tabby pelt. "And Emberpaw is here, too!" my youngest kit exclaimed, her eyes wide with eagerness and triumph.

I was overcome with so much love and delight. "Oh my goodness, my beautiful daughters!" I sighed, almost already feeling as if I had escaped by just seeing my family, and hearing the voices of my Clanmates that currently weren't in sight.

I then looked back to Thornclaw, who flashed me a brief, affectionate glance. "We'll have time for heartfelt greetings later," he insisted, his pale blue gaze then hardening as he leaned closer to the glass. "Lilypetal, are you ready to follow some directions?"

I gave several eager nods back to Thornclaw. "I'd follow a RiverClan cat into ice cold water if it meant that I was getting out of here!"

My mate's eyes then seemed to glow with amusement and relief for just a moment. "Okay! We need to hurry - the Twolegs are going to know that we're here before long," he meowed urgently. He then peered his head past me and gave a sharp nod. "First off, I need you to paw open that cabinet just behind you."

Without a single word, I followed Thornclaw's directions and leaped across the kitchen counter, thanking StarClan already that I was getting out of here even sooner than expected.

I quickly rose onto my hind legs and lightly prodded the cabinet Thornclaw had pointed out with a paw until its opening slowly flew out. "Now what?" I called out to Thornclaw.

"See that long, stick-like thing that gets wider at its end?" I heard my mate reply. "Can you grab it?"

I straightened up even more, and was luckily able to see inside of the cabinet. I immediately saw the object that Thornclaw had been describing, and made a single jump up so that I could snatch it with my teeth.

I then whipped myself around and let my hind paws touch the counter once again. "Grabbed!" I exclaimed through my full mouth.

"Great - now leap across again, and come back to the window with that stick," Thornclaw commanded, and once I had done so, I sat and kneaded my paws into the ground, anticipating more directions.

"Okay, do you see the small slit at the bottom of this window?" Thornclaw then asked, gesturing to said slit with his tail. Once I had nodded to him, he went on. "You'll need to fasten the wide end of your stick into it, deep enough to where it'll stay there without you holding it for the moment."

"Okay, got it!" I replied cheerfully before tightening my grip on the object and speedily shoving it through the small gap at the bottom of the window.

Then, as I backed away and met Thornclaw's certain, determined gaze, I couldn't help but feel absolutely and utterly confused as something occurred to me. "Wait a moment..." I murmured.

Thornclaw flicked his ears, his eyes now gleaming with a bit of mischief, as if he already knew what I was thinking. "What?"

I shook my head slowly back at my mate, completely bewildered. "Thornclaw - how in the name of StarClan do you know what you're talking about?"

Thornclaw simply flashed me another knowing, mischievous in

reply. And as he then nodded to something below, yet another figure leaped up to the window.

Not a golden tabby pelt this time, but black and white. "Well, I suppose that he doesn't," Oreo purred, exchanging an amused glance with Thornclaw. "He needed me to put all of the words in his mouth!"

Great StarClan, the amount of happiness I can feel is being tested each time a new cat leaps up to that window! "Oreo! No way!" I yowled out excitedly. I then looked to Thornclaw, who I could assume had been the one to get Oreo for help. "What next - is the whole of ThunderClan down there?"

"Sorry, I couldn't arrange that in time!" Thornclaw teased. His eyes then seemed to flash with urgency once again as he turned to my brother. "Oreo - she has the spatula fastened at the bottom of the window."

Oreo gave Thornclaw a brief nod. "Awesome!" he exclaimed before looking to me. "Now Lilypetal, this is where it gets a bit complicated. This window is different from the one I used earlier at my house. You remember what knobs are, right?"

I couldn't help but let out a snort. *Good gosh, I've been tampering with them all night!* "Unfortunately."

"I'll take it!" Oreo replied, then gesturing with a paw to a small, hook-like object at the top of one of the panels. "You see that knob at the center of this window, just a little above your head?"

"I've got it in my sights!" I replied.

"Alright - it's going to be a bit tough, but you'll need to grab it with both of your paws and pull it towards you."

"Um..."

I just barely heard Goldenshine's murmur as I got up onto my hindpaws again, grabbing onto the small knob. "Okay - here goes nothing!"

Thornclaw padded up closer to the window as he began to urge me on. "Come on, Lilypetal!"

Beside him, Goldenshine seemed to be tapping on her father's shoulder with her tail, staring at something ahead. "Thornclaw..."

I was concentrated on nothing but the task at hand, praying at any moment that my paws would cause this knob to loosen. "My goodness, this is hard!"

"Lilypetal..."

I finally brought my attention to my daughter, trying to push down my anxiety. "What?"

My stomach then twisted up into a knot, already dreading what my daughter had to say as I met her horrified gaze. And sure enough, what she meowed was as terrible as I'd expected. "I think we woke the Twolegs up..."

As much as I dreaded what I'd see, I forced myself to turn around. And unfortunately, Goldenshine had been right - I could now clearly hear the creature's heavy footsteps as their tall shadow began to loom over the kitchen floor.

"Oh my StarClan," I could just barely hear Thornclaw hiss from the other side of the window. I turned back to him to meet his fearful gaze. "Lilypetal, hurry!"

"I'm trying!" I called back, trying to use my panic to my advantage as I got a grip of the knob once again. I used all of the strength I thought I had to pull against the object. *Please, please, please!* And luckily, just a couple of heartbeats later, a loud snapping sound echoed through the room as the knob released. "Got it!"

I then nervously looked to Oreo, who I was seeing look afraid for the first time since I'd met him. "Okay, now grab onto the thin end of the spatula and pull it down," he directed me, his hazel eyes wide as pressed his front paws against the window. "Lilypetal, come on!"

"I know, I know!" I meowed just before taking another glance behind me, where the Twoleg was now in complete view, looking

angry as it stomped towards me.

"Holy clumps of furballs..." I murmured to myself, then whipping myself around again, fastening my teeth around the spatula, and pulling it down as quickly as I could.

"Mother, hurry!" I heard Emberpaw cry out to me as she began to knock on the window. "Hurry, *please!*"

"You're almost there!" Goldenshine then prompted.

Then, as my daughter yowled, "Lilypetal, it's right behind you!" I felt horrible, familiar paws grab onto my haunches just as I'd been about to shift the window panel.

"No!" I then heard Thornclaw cry out as I was pulled away from the window. "That Twoleg is being shred to bits as soon as I can get through this window!"

I was able to flash my mate a single reassuring, determined look as the Twoleg began to bring me closer to them.

My Clanmates were maybe going to lose hope, but there was no way that I would. No *way* was I going to let a Twoleg carry me away from my home for a *third* time.

So, I tightened my grip around the spatula, making sure that the Twoleg couldn't fully pull me away from it. "I wouldn't resort to that yet!" I called out to Thornclaw before yanking the long object just before it was out of reach, luckily resulting in the window slipping up and leaving just enough of a slit for me to slide through. *Yes!*

I then used my back legs to kick against the Twoleg, and its grip against me completely loosened as I heard it let out what sounded like a pained grunt.

But I wasn't done yet. Once I had landed back onto the counter, I swiftly whipped myself around and used my back legs to push myself up. *This is for you, Mistpelt!* I thought as I then proceeded to slash the Twoleg across the face.

I then began to back towards the window as I watched the Twoleg put its paws up to its face. "Thought you could make me into one of your soft, pampered little housecats all over again? Huh, try again," I taunted to the Twoleg as I leaped up to the window. "You know what? Actually, leave me be."

Then, just as I was about to slide through the window, I looked back one last time and caught sight of Mae and Gus, who seemed to have been watching the whole thing with wide eyes. "Thanks for the *warm* welcome," I called out to them. "But I've got to get home."

With that, I then turned around and gracefully slid thought the gap in the window. As soon as my head had made it through, I could feel Thornclaw grabbing my scruff with his teeth in order to assist me.

Then, as soon as I had made it fully out, me, Thornclaw, Oreo, Goldenshine and Emberpaw jumped down to the ground before the Twoleg could even attempt to reach out for any of us.

Oreo immediately pelted ahead, brushing past Dustystorm, Brightheart, Snowstorm, Spiderleg and Cloudtail, who appeared to have been on watch during the rescue. "Alright, now that we have Lilypetal, we need to get out of this yard! Now!" my brother commanded sharply. I then followed his gaze to where he was nervously staring back at the door nearby, where its knob was beginning to shake. "Come on!"

Just as Oreo commanded, every single cat broke into a run just as the Twoleg burst through the back door and made a run for the gate.

But it was already far behind us as our patrol pelted through the Twolegplace. Everything was practically a blur around me as Oreo led us through several twists and turns.

Eventually, these blurs of what were probably Twoleg nests, thunderpaths and fences all disappeared, and I came to a stop to find that now, rather than houses, *trees* were looming over me.

And wherever Oreo had just led us, wasn't the Twolegplace

anymore. I truthfully had never felt so happy to touch forest grass.

Around me, cats were also beginning to slow down and catch their breaths. "Are we safe now?" Brightheart asked, letting herself fall onto her side.

Oreo stared amusedly down at the ginger-and-white she-cat as he gave a single, definitive nod. "Quite."

"Where in the name of StarClan have you taken us?" Spiderleg hissed, flicking leaf off of his shoulder with his tail.

"To your territory," Oreo replied, sitting down. "Well, not exactly." He then lashed his tail to the side. "It's just a little bit down this hill, but then you'll find yourself at the greenleaf Twoleg nest that's close to your border."

My brother then shifted his gaze over to me, his hazel eyes gleaming with relief and triumph. "And you'll have the privilege of getting to take Lilypetal back with you."

I stared back at Oreo, my heart welling up with so much gratitude at the thought of him banding with Clan cats to help save me. And just as I was about to give him my thanks, I cut myself off as I suddenly felt a muzzle pressing deep into my neck fur. I immediately closed my eyes and pressed back, a purr rumbling in my throat as I heard Thornclaw let out a sigh of relief. "Hi," I whispered to my mate. "Is now time for a heartfelt greeting?"

"Hm, I'd say so," my mate whispered back as he pressed his flank against mine, a purr also rising in his throat.

I didn't speak for many heartbeats, simply leaning against my mate, letting myself take in his warm, familiar scent, and thanking StarClan profusely that we were even able to be here together.

"Oh, Thornclaw, thank you for rescuing me," I then meowed, pulling my head away so that I could meet Thornclaw's gaze. "And... thank you for assuming that you'd *have* to rescue me!"

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes flashed with bewilderment for just a moment. "What do you mean?"

I hesitated for a few heartbeats before replying, actually somewhat nervous to hear my mate's response. "Well... did you even wonder for a moment if I'd decided to stay in the Twoleglace on purpose? Return to my old life?" I asked, vocalizing a worry that had crossed my mind once or twice now. "I know that you were worried before I left to see Oreo again..."

I watched nervously as Thornclaw shrugged, his gaze slightly apprehensive. But he then shook his head quickly and met my gaze with certain, loving eyes. "You're right, I did... but it was a completely irrational thing to wonder about," he admitted, then giving me a quick lick on the head. "Thoughts of losing you make me think the craziest things."

I then heard Cloudtail sniff from behind us. "-and make you act as soft as a snowflake."

Thornclaw simply cleared his throat and flashed the white warrior a sharp look, his eyes narrowed.

I purred with amusement and then touched my nose to Thornclaw's cheek, bringing his attention back to me. "And that goes both ways," I meowed softly to him.

And then, after a moment's thought, I murmured, "It's really that crazy? To think that I'd ever return to the Twolegplace?"

"Yes, Lilypetal," Thornclaw replied, his gaze softening as he slowly got over Cloudtail's comment. "It's crazy for many, many reasons."

"Aww, you trust me," I purred back at my mate as I nuzzled my head against his shoulder. I then pulled away and flicked my ears, realizing that I needed to correct my words. "As you very well should, but... you trust me!"

Thornclaw pulled me closer with his paw, giving me another lick on the head. "Eh, kind of."

After giving the golden tabby a quick sheathed-paw-to-the-ear for his teasing, I meowed, "I can't believe you, of all cats - the cat that hates the Twoleglace more than any other cat that hates the

Twolegplace - actually came back to the Twolegplace!"

"I mustered up the courage," Thornclaw replied, another purr rumbling in his throat as he met my gaze and ran his tail along my flank. "And I think I did it with pretty good reason."

I was practically overwhelmed with love as I stared back into my mate's eyes. "Thank you so much, my love," I whispered to him. "You're incredible."

Then as I continued to nuzzle my mate, Goldenshine and Emberpaw quickly ran up to join us. I wrapped my tail around Emberpaw, who had pressed herself against me, and leaned my head onto Goldenshine's shoulder.

I then finally turned to look back at Oreo, who was looking back at the four of us as his eyes gleamed with happiness. "And hey, you!" I purred to my brother. "Decided to join a ThunderClan patrol?"

Oreo shrugged and purred with amusement as he padded up to us. "I guess you could say that," he replied, sitting down just in front of me. "I had actually just finished my dinner and was about to head off to sleep when I heard Thornclaw tapping at that window."

I briefly looked back at my mate, flashing him a teasing, affectionate look. "He's rude like that."

"Oh, indeed!" Oreo purred. "I leaped up to the window, and I'll admit that I felt a little intimidated to see a whole crowd of cats there waiting for me, but as soon as Thornclaw told me that he needed my help finding you, I jumped outside without another thought!" He then lashed his tail towards the other cats in the rescue patrol, his head hanging down shyly. "These guys tracked down your scent, but I'd like to think that I came in handy once we found the house you were in."

"And you were. Thank you," Thornclaw purred, pulling me closer to him with a paw and resting his head on mine. "Thank you, really."

"Yes, thank you!" Brightheart meowed cheerfully. "Oreo, was it? Thank you so much."

Cloudtail then trotted up to stand by his mate. "It's times like these where Dustystorm and I probably both wished we'd carried a bit of our kittypet knowledge to the Clans," the white tom joked, briefly exchanging a glance with Dustystorm. "But you were of great help, Oreo."

"Yes, thank you!" Dustystorm added on.

All eyes then turned to Spiderleg as he let out an almost inaudible hiss. "Mm, foxdung. I'm sure we would have been just as well off without-"

The black and brown warrior then quickly cut himself off as he received a few glares. "Nevermind," he then muttered, licking a paw and running it over his head.

I purred with amusement, along with some other cats, before looking to Oreo once again. "Don't listen to him, Oreo," I joked to my brother.

I then ran up so that I could touch my nose to his. "Thank you so much. I will never, ever forget this." I then pulled away, flashing my brother a teasing glance. "So, how did it all feel? Running alongside Clan cats, being in a patrol... leading a rescue? Pretty awesome, right?"

Oreo, as he typically did, already knew what I was trying to get at, and gave me an affectionate nuzzle on the head with his tail. "Hm, nice try," he called out to me before beginning to pad away in the direction of the Twolegplace. "I had my moment, and that's all that I could ever ask for!"

I let out a snort as I then waved my tail in goodbye to my brother. *Hm. Me too,* I thought jokingly. *Except I didn't ask for it.*

~>~>~>~>~>~>~

"Oh my goodness, Thornclaw. It was awful."

"I know, Lilypetal."

"The floors... they were so cold!"

"I'm sure they were."

"The Twolegs tried to *pet* me. Why do they think that cats like that?"

"They are strange creatures, Lilypetal."

"And I don't understand how any cat could get peace and quiet... ever! Constant roaring of monsters, the weird things all over the nest making noises... I thought that my head was going to explode!"

Thornclaw, who had now been listening to my complaints for several heartbeats now, chuckled and pulled me closer to him. "Mine would have first."

The two of us then exchanged an amused glance as we continued to travel with our patrol through the ThunderClan forest. And as I let my eyes flit around the familiar forest, I knew for certain, it had never all felt more like home.

The Twolegplace, a Twoleg nest, had once been considered my home, and it was so odd to think that something that had once been my whole life now felt so wrong and strange to me.

And I would never have to picture what things would have been like had I been stuck there, and not been able to return to my *real* home, thank StarClan. Everything was quickly falling back into place - I was back in ThunderClan territory, I was already surrounded by family and friends once again, *and I'm back on StarClan's and the Dark Forest's hunting grounds,* I thought, feeling a mix of apprehension and elation at that realization.

"Swiftflight?"

With Goldenshine's exclamation, I was taken away from my thoughts, and the entire returning patrol stopped in their tracks.

And just a moment after Goldenshine had called out her son's name, the dark gray warrior's pelt emerged from some shrubs. His gray-blue eyes widened as soon as his gaze fell on our patrol. "You all are back!" he breathed. He then flicked his gaze over to me, and his eyes washed over with relief. "And you have Lilypetal with you!"

"Yes, we do," Goldenshine replied as she ran up to meet Swiftflight. "What are you doing out here so late, by yourself?"

"Firestar sent me out to see if you all were returning," the warrior replied. "He'd just called a Clan meeting."

Beside me, Thornclaw sniffed, his gaze skeptical as he looked back at Swiftflight. "A Clan meeting?"

"At *moonhigh*?" Cloudtail then added on, his blue eyes amused. "What's he thinking?"

It was then that I was able to notice the glint of alarm and distress in Swiftflight's eyes, and I felt my heart begin to beat faster. "Whatever it is, he said that we need to get back as soon as possible," he replied sharply as he turned around and began to lead our patrol back to camp. "Apparently, it's gravely serious."

Chapter 24

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I was just as uninformed as the patrol following behind me through the forest, but I already had a strong idea of the words we'd be hearing once we returned to our camp.

I would never forget the solemn expression I'd seen on Firestar's face as he'd leaped up to the Highledge just moments earlier; the rage, tenacity, and apprehension in his eyes was like nothing I had ever seen before.

There were only a few things - one thing, rather - that I knew of that could intimidate a Clan leader this much. To cause him to be filled with so much determination and anger, but so much fear at the same time...

I was dreading the moment that my suspicions would likely be confirmed, and I was almost glad to be the one that Firestar had chosen to acquire Lilypetal's rescue patrol and bring them back to camp, as it would give me something else to think about for the moment. They had all been anxiously whispering to each other following the warning I'd given them, and I really hoped that they couldn't sense my own nerves and fears as I continued to lead them through our territory.

When the camp entrance actually came into sight, I decided to glance back at the patrol. I immediately locked eyes with my own mother, who was walking just beside Lilypetal and Thornclaw.

I stared back at her uncertain, worried gaze for a moment, having no idea what to do except shrug back at her. Surely she - Thornclaw and Lilypetal as well - had the same idea as I had about what Firestar would have to say to us, but neither of us wanted to think about it for the moment.

I then shifted my gaze to find that Snowstorm, who had also been on the rescue patrol, slowly padding up to walk beside me. Rather than looking fearful or troubled, her blue eyes were dark and curious. "Gravely serious, huh?" she murmured, reprising my words from earlier. "Well then, I'm glad that you found us so quickly."

I managed to snort with amusement, relieved to actually be speaking with someone else rather than being stuck in my thoughts. "I'm glad that you all were even *in* ThunderClan territory to find in the first place," I joked, looking up at the star-flitted sky above.

Nearly dawn now, I realized, flicking my ears. *They were really, really fast to return.* "And you got Lilypetal back!" I meowed to Snowstorm as I met her gaze again. "How did you all manage to do it so quickly?"

Snowstorm gave a single lash of her tail and sniffed, her eyes glinting with mischief. "Hm... well, let's just say that we got some kittypet help."

"Kittypet help?" I repeated, somewhat confused as I tilted my head to the side. "Do you mean Dustystorm or Cloudtail?"

"Nope!" Snowstorm exclaimed. "We got Oreo to help us!" She then briefly glanced back towards Lilypetal. "He won't admit it to his sister, but Great StarClan, he's definitely got some warrior potential in there."

"I see," I replied, narrowing my eyes and trying to hold back a purr of amusement as I internally observed how cheerful and at ease Snowstorm seemed to be, despite the ominous, cryptic warning I had just delivered to her patrol - something beyond the excitement of being apart of a rescue mission. "Well, then I suppose I partly have Oreo to thank for all of you getting back safely."

I then looked back to Snowstorm from where I'd been glancing at the camp entrance up ahead, and was surprised to find blue eyes full of relief and gratitude staring back at me. "What?" I couldn't help but ask, utterly weirded-out by my friend's behavior.

Snowstorm then gave me a small nudge on the shoulder. "Oreo isn't

the only cat that needs thanking right now," she meowed, her eyes still gleaming.

I was beginning to worry that Snowstorm had accidently eaten something strange... or *poisonous* while she was in the Twolegplace; I wondered if I had ever seen her look so at ease, especially under foreboding circumstances like this. "Well, okay..." I responded through my bewilderment. "Who else, then? Did some other kittypet help you?"

"I'm not talking about the rescue anymore, Swiftflight," Snowstorm then insisted, her warm gaze burning into mine. "I'm talking about you."

"*Me?*" I repeated, my eyes widening at my friend's words as we both crawled through the gorse tunnel. "What in the name of StarClan do you have to thank me for?" *Unfortunately, I can't think of many things I've done up until now that are worth receiving gratitude for...*

Snowstorm began to open her mouth to speak, but quickly closed it again as we made our way into the camp clearing, probably realizing that her voice would break into the silence.

Because it was quiet. Eerily quiet, except for a couple of whispers being exchanged here and there. Quiet enough to where any cat would be quite hesitant to speak at even a normal volume. Everyone just seemed to be awaiting Firestar's words.

The ThunderClan leader was still in the same place that I'd left him in, up on the Highledge. He only flicked his gaze towards the returning rescue patrol as they all sat down, and briefly flashed Lilypetal a relieved, warm glance before looking out to the rest of his Clan.

I thought that my heartbeat would surely be able to be heard as ThunderClan continued to wait for their leader to speak.

And I was sure that once he did, everyone's stomachs flipped upside down in anticipation of what he would say.

And it was then that my suspicions were confirmed. "Clanmates,"

the ThunderClan leader began. "We face an enemy stronger than we have ever known! The danger comes from dead cats as well as the living."

I then had to screw my eyes shut as he then meowed, "The Dark Forest has sworn to destroy the Clans."

It was just as I had feared.

The place that I had been training in every single night for several moons, the place that making so many cats blind to their true intentions, the place that had nearly made me one of their own, was finally making themselves known to those who feared them most.

It was what my kin - Goldenshine, Lilypetal and Thornclaw - and I had been awaiting. It was what many cats in this Clan had been anticipating for moons, *but we never would have imagined that it would come so quickly!*

As gasps rose and spread around the camp, I looked behind me to find that Goldenshine was looking right back at me, her eyes filled with horror. Thornclaw was staring ahead, his eyes dark and unreadable. And Lilypetal was staring at the ground, her hazel eyes blazing with panic. Not a sort of panic that came with news like Firestar had given, but something more... *urgent*. She looked as if the cats of the Dark Forest were about to burst from the camp entrance at that very moment, and that she wasn't ready for it at all. "No..." I then heard her whisper.

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes as I looked back at the brown tabby-and-white she-cat, reflecting on what Ivypool had said earlier about my older kin. I hadn't wanted to believe it when she'd said that she had seen Lilypetal in the Dark Forest, speaking with Ashfur and Tigerstar.

But I wondered if I should be taking the silver she-cat's words even more seriously than I had been before. It appeared as if Ivypool's words to me earlier had been a little more than the she-cat just needing to vent about her current worries - they had been much more serious and present.

I glanced over at the silver-and-white tabby she-cat to see her staring up at Firestar. She didn't look back at me, her dark blue eyes grim and somber. She didn't even blink when Cloudtail's voice broke through the gasps of alarm. "That's impossible!"

Firestar scanned his green eyes across the clearing. "You've all smelled the scents and seen the paw prints in the forest."

"They're just rogues!" Dustpelt then insisted, reflecting what I myself had taken from the strange stenches and marks left out in the forest in recent days.

I looked back once more and just barely caught Lilypetal and Thornclaw exchanging a nervous glance, and I wondered even more what Lilypetal, and Thornclaw too, knew that I didn't.

"Have you forgotten the scent of Tigerstar?" Firestar asked his Clanmate, his eyes narrowing.

Dustpelt hesitated for a moment. "I... I thought I imagined it."

Firestar stared back at the dark tabby warrior for a moment before continuing on. "A battle is coming that we have to win, for the sake of every warrior that ever lived," he meowed out clearly. "We must fight alongside the other Clans, because this enemy threatens us all. ShadowClan, WindClan, and RiverClan will each send three warriors here at dusk to join our patrols. We will send three warriors to their camps."

The ThunderClan leader then looked down to nod to his deputy. "Brambleclaw, you choose who will go."

Behind me, I could hear Thornclaw's tail brushing against the ground. I looked back to see his narrowed pale blue gaze staring up at Firestar. "Won't ShadowClan just take advantage of this to steal our territory?"

The leader's reply nearly sent a chill down my spine. "If they do, all will be lost," he answered grimly.

My gaze then shifted towards the nursery as Brightheart spoke. Her blue eyes were wide as she wrapped her tail around her kits,

Amberkit, Dewkit, and Snowkit, who had been born about a quarter moon ago. "How will I protect my kits?" she asked in dismay.

I felt a strong, painful pang in my heart with the she-cat's words. But it wasn't because I was worried about solely her kits. *How will* I *protect my Clanmates? My family? And...*

My gaze then slowly shifted over to a certain ginger tabby pelt, who was currently making her way over to Goldenshine, her amber eyes wide, worried moons. *Cherrypaw...* I thought, my heart sinking. *I wish it was in my power to make sure that not even one of those spirits lays a claw on her.*

I then looked to Poppyfrost, who was sitting a few fox-lengths away. *I'd protect her with everything I have, if you'd only let me.*

My heart then skipped a beat as I noticed Ivypool standing up out of the corner of my eye. The tabby she-cat slowly padded forward, acting as if she wasn't aware of all of the gazes suddenly burning into her fur.

She stopped once she was just below the Highledge, and turned to face her Clanmates. "I know how they fight," the silver she-cat announced once the worried yowls of the queens died down. "I can teach their moves to the Clan."

I stared, completely and utterly baffled at what the warrior was choosing to reveal, and what she could be sacrificing by doing it.

"How do you know?" Dustpelt called out accusingly.

Firestar swiftly leaped down from the Highledge and stood next to his kin. "I sent her to spy," the ThunderClan leader explained. "She knows more about our enemy than any cat. Learn from her."

Close by, I could see Mousewhisker's mouth dropping as he stared back at Ivypool. "You were spying in the Dark Forest?"

I then fully looked over my shoulder to see the tom's baffled expression. Some of the cats around him shared it, ones that I soon realized also shared something in common with Mousewhisker - cats who trained in the Dark Forest.

Blossomfall, Birchfall, and Mousewhisker had once been cats that trained alongside me. I'd once shared the same hope that they had - that these Dark Forest cats were truly going to make me the fiercest, strongest warrior the Clans had ever seen. But I, with many cats' help, was able to realize the sick intent behind it all, leave, and dissociate myself completely from that life.

I couldn't even begin to imagine how these cats were feeling - fear, guilt, shame? Were they worried that Ivypool would reveal what they were doing to the rest of the Clans?

I then flicked my ears as another question crossed my mind. *What if Ivypool were to tell others of my past there?* I wondered. *What if she were to tell cats the true reason as to why was once such a fox-heart?*

I quickly realized that that wasn't about to matter. I was already seeing how much this secret of their time in the Dark Forest was weighing on these trainees. And while I had left the gruesome place, mine still weighed on me as well.

But I knew of one way that it could lift.

My heart felt heavy as I glanced back at Cherrypaw. *StarClan, please don't let this be too big of a sacrifice. Please let this further help me gain my place in this Clan.*

I then looked over to Poppyfrost. *Please.*

I took a deep breath, and took a step forward, pushing down my apprehension with all of my might. "You can learn from me as well," I meowed out, trying my best to keep my voice from shaking. I then met Ivypool's shocked blue gaze, and padded up to stand beside her. "I have also been to the Dark Forest."

My gaze then fell to the ground in shame. "But... I wasn't a spy. I trained there."

I truthfully had never been so terrified to do something as little as lift up my head. I could hear quite a few surprised gasps, and feel several gazes burning deep into my head.

And they had all the right to do it. After all, my words were

probably coming as an explanation to my behavior since I'd been a young apprentice.

But, after just a moment, I forced my head back up as I realized something. *It was my past,* I told myself. *It was my past, and I'm about to tell them that. If they are going to give me grief for something that I used to be, then that is their issue.*

I then took another deep breath. *I learned that after the fox situation.* "It's now been moons since I've been there, and while I'd hoped to never associate myself with them ever again..." I went on, giving a brief nod to Ivypool. "If there's anything I can do with any of it, it would be to use my training to help my Clanmates."

I then scanned my eyes around the clearing, locking gazes with each cat individually. "You all can trust me," I insisted to them. "I'll teach you everything that I know." *I mean it with all of my heart.*

As I had expected, many of the other eyes that I stared into were full of shock, but not nearly as much fear and distrust as I thought I'd see. *I'll just have to show them that I'm not lying,* I told myself, observing all of the cats who seemed uncertain of my words. *But my actions will speak louder than my words.*

The cats that already knew of my past - Lilypetal, Thornclaw, Ivypool, Snowstorm and Goldenshine, were all looking back at me, clearly shocked by what I had decided to reveal, but also clearly beaming with pride.

And the Dark Forest trainees... well, let's just say that their mouths were practically big enough that I'd be able to leap straight into them.

My heart then nearly skipped a beat as my gray-blue eyes locked with Cherrypaw's amber ones. I absolutely dreaded what I'd see there. What if this caused her to hate me as much as Poppyfrost did? What if she wouldn't even need her mother to prompt her not to speak to me again?

I even had to hold myself back from running up to her and spewing out every single possible thing I could say to convince the ginger

she-cat that she could trust me, but I forced myself to stay in place.

But even if I had built up the courage to do that, my heart lifted as I realized that it didn't seem to be necessary.

Cherrypaw's amber eyes were glowing with admiration as she stared back at me. By her stance, I could tell that she was completely astonished by what I had just revealed to her and the rest of ThunderClan, but her gaze revealed nothing but warmth and pride.

My heart seemed to grow as I realized that the ginger she-cat was seeing the situation in the way that I hoped that the rest of my Clanmates would eventually see it, just as my family and closest friends were. *She still trusts me, after all of that... I can't believe it.* I thought. *Great StarClan, I don't deserve her... in any regard.*

I then reluctantly had to break my gaze from Cherrypaw to look back at Firestar.

Thank StarClan, the ginger tom's eyes were calm - calm as they could be under the circumstances - and approving. "I am glad to hear that, Swiftflight," the ThunderClan leader meowed, giving me a single nod. "Thank you. You and Ivypool will both assist your Clanmates with your knowledge."

Firestar then turned to face his Clan once again as I exchanged a relieved, triumphant glance with Ivypool. "We will win this battle because we are fighting for our lives and for the lives of our Clanmates," he meowed clearly. "Our enemies are already dead. They fight only out of hate, and that will be their weakness."

"We'll beat them!" Cloudtail yowled out, many cats following just after.

"I'll shred any Dark Forest warrior I lay my paws on!" Molepaw exclaimed as he slashed at the air with unsheathed claws.

Firestar scanned his eyes around the clearing of cats once again, his green eyes shimmering in the dawn light. "Then let's start training," he beamed. "For victory!"

After more yowls of triumph, the cats of ThunderClan began to gather into small clusters, whispering to each other as Brambleclaw made his way around camp, quickly giving assignments and dividing the clusters up into training groups.

For a moment, I stayed in my place next to Ivypool and simply watched as these groups were formed, absolutely baffled by how well making my announcement had gone. I even wondered if the thoughts of the Dark Forest spirits lingering on Clan land had been too strong and terrifying for my Clanmates to even process it - after all, they had found out that I had once trained with the cats that had once betrayed them, and were now attempting to betray them again.

Either way, I suppose that I was thankful, and was happy to be given yet another opportunity to prove myself.

"Swiftflight!"

I pulled myself out of my thoughts, jerking my attention to Brambleclaw as he padded up to me and Ivypool. "Swiftflight," he repeated, nodding to me. "For now, I'm going to have you train with Foxleap, Icecloud, and Snowstorm. And Ivypool,"

The deputy then nodded to the silver tabby she-cat next to me. "Hollyleaf, Molepaw, Rosepetal and Whitewing are going out into the forest to train - you will join them," he commanded. He then shifted his gaze to me, and then Ivypool again. "Since we are counting on the both of you to know what the Dark Forest may bring to us, I'm going to have you all train in many of our groups."

Ivypool gave Brambleclaw a single sharp nod. "That's fine with me."

"Me too," I meowed immediately after.

With that, Brambleclaw simply gave us one last nod before padding off and disappearing back into the forming groups of cats.

I then turned to Ivypool as I felt her brush my shoulder with her tail. "Hey," she whispered to me once I had met her gaze. "Good luck."

I used my tail to give her a quick flick on the ear. "You too," I replied, before quickly padding ahead in search of Snowstorm, Foxleap, or Icecloud.

As I traveled across the camp, my eyes immediately fell on where Goldenshine was standing with Nightwing, Sandstorm, Dustystorm, Emberpaw and Lightningpaw. She flashed me a look of urgency, nodding towards Lilypetal and Thornclaw, who were currently speaking with Brambleclaw near the Highledge.

I instantly knew what she was implying. *The four of us will need to meet again soon.*

I returned my mother's nod and then continued to make my way towards Snowstorm, Foxleap and Icecloud, who I now spotted gathered near the warriors den.

My stomach then immediately twisted up into a knot once I passed Poppyfrost and her group. I didn't even need to take a glance to know that it was her - I could practically feel her blue eyes burning into my fur.

I hadn't been able to spot her when I had revealed my past in the Dark Forest to the Clan, but I could easily imagine the look on her face.

The same one she was giving me at the moment. "So, it's even worse than I had originally thought," the tortoiseshell she-cat murmured.

I stopped in my tracks and shut my eyes for a moment. *Oh, no...*

I was full of fear and dread as I turned around and met her dark, resentful gaze. "Poppyfrost-"

"To think that my daughter has been spending time with a cat who *trained* in the *Dark Forest!*" the she-cat growled, her voice rising over whatever I could have tried to say. "I can't even begin to comprehend it."

I then felt my fur begin to bristle as Poppyfrost took a step closer to me, her demeanor tense and hostile. "Is that why you've spent any time with her at all?" she demanded. "To gain your reputation in

this Clan and wipe away your dark past by making friends with the sweet apprentice?"

I could hardly believe what I was hearing, as it was so far, *so* incredibly far from the truth. "*What?*" I exclaimed in complete bewilderment. "No! I..."

I then trailed off, having absolutely no idea how to begin my next words, or what words to even say. "I..." I stammered. *Why is this so hard?* I thought as I closed my eyes in distress, wondering how it was possible to want to speak, yet want to hold my words back so badly at the same time.

I then opened them a moment later, and met Poppyfrost's cold gaze once again. "I thought so," she muttered. And then, as she began to walk away, I felt the same pang of regret that I'd felt when I'd watched her and Cherrypaw walk away with their patrol in the forest. "Go on," Poppyfrost then called back. "Your group is probably waiting for you."

Wait!

I watched the tortoiseshell she-cat walk off, having to push down any impulse I had to chase after her, and having to push down my pangs of regret. *But what would I accomplish, anyway? For StarClan's sake, what is my problem? I barely got three words out to her.* I asked myself as I turned and trotted over to Snowstorm, Foxleap and Icecloud, finally being able to convene with them.

The three cats were staring at me in awe as I approached and sat down in front of them, and I anxiously waited for one of them to speak. *What is the first thing you'd say to a cat that just revealed that they used to train with evil spirits?*

Snowstorm was slowly nodding her head as she stared back at me. "Not bad, my friend," she then muttered to me, giving me a wink. "Not bad."

I flashed Snowstorm a grateful look, and then nervously looked over to where Foxleap seemed to be in deep contemplation. "So..." he murmured, slowly lifting his gaze from where it'd fallen to the

ground to meet mine. It was the first time I'd ever seen the dark ginger tom look so solemn. "You were a Dark Forest cat, huh?"

I let out a long sigh, forcing myself to keep my former mentor's gaze despite my guilt. "Not proud of it," I replied with the smallest shrug.

I then watched nervously as Foxleap exchanged a glance with Icecloud. And after an incredibly long moment, he looked back at me, his gaze surprisingly warm. "Well, I suppose that's all that matters," he meowed, dipping his head to me.

I stared back at the tom, overwhelmed by his understanding and compassion. *Foxleap was always a goofy mouse-brain with a big mouth, but he's one of the most loyal, supportive companions I could ever ask for*, I thought as the two of us exchanged a warm glance.

Then, after another moment, the ginger warrior sniffed and flitted his eyes around our gathered group. "Well, look here - the four of us training again, how about that?" he observed, his voice full of laughter.

Icecloud purred with amusement as well. "Except this time, it looks like Swiftflight is going to be training *us!*" the white she-cat commented before lashing her tail towards me, her eyes big and eager. "Swiftflight, what do you suggest we try first?"

I flicked my ears, pleasantly surprised by my group's enthusiasm at receiving my training. "Hm... well, since there's three of you, I can show you all this really neat move that's great for two cats against one," I murmured, thinking out loud as I padded up closer to the three cats. "Here, Snowstorm, you can-"

I then cut off my own words as I thought I heard a hiss come from behind the warriors den.

I quickly brushed it off, not thinking anything of it, and spoke again. "Snowstorm, you can-"

The hiss then came again, a bit louder this time.

I narrowed my eyes and quickly whipped my head in the direction of the noise. "Is someone there?" I called out, trying to push down

my frustration.

After a few heartbeats of silence, I actually received a response. "Swiftflight?" I heard a familiar kind, sweet whisper. "It's Cherrypaw!"

My heart then seemed to skip a beat as the ginger tabby she-cat emerged from behind the bundle of brambles. Her amber eyes were wide and wary. "Could I speak to you?" she then asked, shyly flicking her gaze over to Snowstorm, Icecloud and Foxleap. "For just a moment?"

I immediately found myself edging towards her. "Um... sure," I meowed. I then glanced back at the group, and tried my best to ignore Snowstorm's gleaming, smug expression. "While I'm gone, you all can practice the underbelly slash - I saw it a lot when I was in the Dark Forest."

Then, without even waiting for their reply, I quickly turned around and began to follow Cherrypaw back behind the warriors den, my nerves were rising with each pawstep that I took. They were so strong that they overshadowed my excitement of getting to be alone with the ginger she-cat.

By the time that I sat down in front of Cherrypaw, I was desperately praying to StarClan that we hadn't been spotted. "Cherrypaw, what are you doing? Do you have any idea how risky this is?" I demanded to her. "Your mother would burst into flames if she saw us back here!"

Cherrypaw urgently nodded back at me. "I know, which is why we have to hurry!" she pleaded to me.

She then took a step closer to me, and all of the panic and anxiety that had been rising inside of me quickly diminished as I met her gaze. "But I really, really needed to talk to you," she meowed more softly.

She then let out a sigh and began to pace the area. "Oh, Swiftflight, I've tried to talk to Poppyfrost so many times to no avail!" she confessed, her voice full of distress. "I've explained to her how close

we've gotten, how your heroic actions weren't out of just selfishness, how you've been so kind to me... but she won't budge!"

I couldn't help but close my eyes and let out a sigh, ruthlessly pushing down my disappointment and dread. "No..." I breathed. *No, please, no...*

"I don't know how much more I could try before she finally decides to claw my mouth off..." Cherrypaw went on. "I don't know what more I could say!"

The ginger she-cat then stopped in her tracks, locking her gaze with mine once again. I hated to see the sadness in her amber eyes. "She's so set on thinking the worst of you," she then meowed, shaking her head slowly, "and it's completely unfair."

I raised my eyebrows back at her. "Unfair, Cherrypaw?" I couldn't help but question. "But... she's right!"

My heart then sank as I recalled my latest confrontation with the tortoiseshell she-cat. "And as much as I hate to say it, convincing her that I'm a good cat for you-" I then nervously cut off my words. "for... at *all*, now that she knows that I used to train in the Dark Forest isn't going to help matters."

I then lowered my head to the ground, too scared to look at Cherrypaw for the moment. "I... I thought you'd be feeling the same way as she does..." I murmured, almost inaudibly. "...as much as I didn't want it to be true." *What if I just imagined the admiration in her gaze?*

My apprehension and worries flew away once again, my ears growing hot and my stomach fluttering as Cherrypaw trotted up to me and gently rubbed her head against my shoulder. "Well, Swiftflight, I don't, so you don't have to worry about that."

"But... *why?*" I asked Cherrypaw in shock. "How?" *Why are you so considerate and trusting? I don't deserve it!*

Cherrypaw pulled away from my shoulder, her gaze revealing as much shock as I currently felt. "What do you mean, 'how'?" she

meowed. She then hardened her gaze. "The Dark Forest doesn't define who you are, does it?"

"Well-"

"It doesn't," Cherrypaw insisted sharply. My fur then began to tingle as her amber gaze softened, and she placed a single paw over mine. "At least, it doesn't to me."

I practically felt dizzy as I stared back at the she-cat, getting lost in her amber gaze, and at the same time continuing to be amazed by her trust in me, and her unconditional compassion.

So, I actually felt somewhat taken aback when Cherrypaw broke her gaze, her eyes widening as she let out a gasp. "And Poppyfrost will feel the same way if *you* speak to her, Swiftflight!"

It took me a moment to process Cherrypaw's words. "What?" I asked, having to blink a few times to bring myself back into focus.

Cherrypaw turned to look back at me once again, her amber gaze now sparkling. "Swiftflight, I know how amazing you are, and hopefully you do, too," she began to explain. "If Poppyfrost hears from you that she shouldn't judge you based on your past, that you're not going to be a bad influence on me, she might let us... well..." She then shyly looked away from me and shifted her paws back and forth. "...spend time together again."

For some reason, an immense amount of fear and timidity began to rise inside of me with Cherrypaw's suggestion. "Yeah..." I breathed. "Maybe..."

Cherrypaw's gaze then washed over with concern. "Maybe?" she repeated as she tried to search my gaze. "I mean... if that's what you want..."

The ginger she-cat's eyes then began to widened as she watched me continue to hesitate. "Is it, Swiftflight?" she asked me worriedly, taking a step closer to me.

"Cherrypaw, I..." For a moment, I thought I had gained the courage I needed to answer Cherrypaw, her troubled gaze bothering me like

nothing else, but I then almost instantly felt as if I was physically being yanked back. "Well..."

I trailed off once again. "It's... I mean..."

I then shut my eyes and lowered my head, what I knew I wanted to do and say feeling as difficult as a cat trying to swim upriver. *I know what I want to say... so, why can't I say it? Why does it feel so wrong to want to say it?*

I could barely stand to look at Cherrypaw's hurt expression out of the corner of my eye. "Oh... I see," she whispered after a few heartbeats. "Um... that's okay." She then hesitated for several more, and I felt my heart break as I saw her shut her eyes, and listen to her voice become hoarser. "It's completely alright. You don't have to. It's just... I..."

She then completely turned away from me. "I... I thought that you felt the same way that I did."

For a moment, I felt as light as the smallest, most dainty feather. "What...?" I breathed. *Oh my StarClan...*

Cherrypaw then whipped herself around to face me again, her eyes full of hurt. And I stood, speechless, as the ginger tabby she-cat confirmed the speculation that Snowstorm had brought up to me moons and moons before. "I have feelings for you, Swiftflight!" Cherrypaw admitted, her voice thick with pain. "I have since we were kits, and I was never sure if you returned them."

She then screwed her eyes shut. "But now, as we've become so close... I thought that you were just as willing to fight for... *us* as I was. But... I guess not."

My heart began to beat faster with panic all over again. *No! No!* I insisted to her in my own mind. *That's not it at all! Not even a little!*

But all I felt I could do was stand, frozen, as I watched Cherrypaw break her gaze from me yet again. "It's alright," she then breathed. She then let out a sigh, stood up, and quickly began to leave our hiding place. "Listen, we should both probably return to training,

before any cat notices that we're gone."

No! Cherrypaw, please come back!

My gaze followed Cherrypaw as she padded past me, my heart suddenly feeling like it had been smashed into countless amounts of pieces - the words I needed to say to make things right - bring the truth to light - still not being able to escape my jaws, no matter how much I wanted them to. It was just as difficult as it'd been trying to speak with Poppyfrost.

Cherrypaw stopped in her tracks for just a moment, giving me one last long look full of sorrow. "I'll see you around, Swiftflight," she whispered, then turning around once again and disappearing into the camp clearing.

No... "Cherrypaw..." I quietly called back to her. I then let out a sigh and closed my eyes. "Come back... please." *Let me try again...*

But I knew that unfortunately, for now, that couldn't happen.

I finally forced myself to stand up, leave my spot behind the warriors den, and return to my training group. *Things could've gone so differently just now...* I realized. *But I was the reason that that didn't happen, and yet...*

I then had to shake my head quickly and attempt to bring myself back into focus as I came into view of my Clanmates once again.

I returned to my training group to find that Foxleap and Icecloud seemed to be practicing the underbelly rake, just as I'd told them to.

I then looked at Snowstorm, and was surprised to find her looking right back at me - her blue eyes narrowed and full of concern and contemplation.

All I could do for the moment was simply give her a somber, warning glance before nodding to Icecloud and Foxleap, who were finishing up the move and standing up. "Okay..." I breathed, shaking out my fur and trying to ignore the overwhelming feelings of remorse and grief that threatened to completely take me down. "Now, about that one move..."

Chapter 25

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I truly don't think I had ever seen the ThunderClan camp look so busy since I had been born.

Every single cat in ThunderClan was out in the clearing - kits, apprentices, warriors, elders and all. They were each in their assigned training groups, all of their eyes filled with determination as they reviewed any possible battle moves and techniques that they could use against the Dark Forest cats.

I myself had been doing just that with Nightwing, Dustystorm, Sandstorm, Emberpaw and Lightningpaw, before I felt incredibly inclined to make some visits.

And there was no time to waste, considering this unsettling, dire, and critical situation that was being brought upon every Clan cat around the lake.

As I traveled away from my group, lashing my tail to them in farewell, I began to scan my eyes around the clearing - there being three different pelts that I was looking for.

I couldn't help but feel a strong wave of pride as I let my eyes rest on the dark gray pelt of my son for just a moment. He was currently next to the warriors den directing Snowstorm, Foxleap and Icecloud with a move that definitely looked complex enough to have come from the Dark Forest.

And he doesn't even have to be ashamed of it. Not anymore, I thought, reflecting on Swiftflight's bold choice of revealing his dark past to his Clanmates.

Great StarClan, had I been absolutely terrified to see the Clan's response when my son had made his announcement; their opinions

of him had already been rocky enough. But it had quickly become apparent just moments later that Swiftflight's efforts to change were paying off.

As I looked back at him, teaching his Clanmates, I observed that he definitely still seemed winded and a bit shaken by the confrontation. He looked slightly ruffled, and it appeared as if he was trying to mask feelings of dismay. *I wonder if he's nervous about the Dark Forest? More nervous than he's willing to show?* I thought curiously. *Or is it something else?*

I then let out a snort and continued to walk ahead. *Whatever he's feeling, it's incredibly likely that he'd never say it out loud.*

I flicked my ears and quickened my pace. *Swiftflight already knows the news that I'm going to pass on. My parents, however, don't.*

I then made my way over to where the brown tabby-and-white pelt of Lilypetal, who I saw first out of my two parents, was training with Cloudtail, Birchfall, Wrenpaw and Whitewing. She currently appeared to be helping Wrenpaw with a battle move.

Not wanting to startle her, I slowly came to a stop and gently tapped on Lilypetal's shoulder with the tip of my tail.

My mother immediately turned around. "Oh! Hi, Goldenshine!" Lilypetal meowed kindly. "Is everything okay?"

She then snorted and shook her head quickly. "Well... you know what I mean," she muttered, shrugging and giving a purr of amusement.

I briefly flashed her a concerned look. It was almost instantly clear to me that Lilypetal was trying to put on a brave face despite everything that had arisen since she'd returned from the Twolegplace. There was obviously a lot more on her mind than what she was wanting to show. *As she always does,* I thought. *She's so strong.*

I then gave my mother a nod. "Yes," I replied to her. "I just need to talk to you for a moment - if you can spare it."

I then flicked my gaze towards Wrenpaw, who was staring curiously back at me from where he stood just behind Lilypetal. "What?" I meowed to him, laughter in my voice. "I can't have some time with mother like you are?"

My younger brother simply shrugged, his pale blue eyes a mix of humor and annoyance.

Lilypetal looked affectionately back at her son for a moment before returning her gaze to me. "Sure! I can definitely spare a moment," she answered as she began to brush past me.

I followed her with my eyes for a couple of heartbeats, and then gave a nod to Wrenpaw. "Don't worry, I'll bring her right back," I told him teasingly.

The brown tabby tom snorted in response. "And?" he muttered, slightly defensive. "It's not like I need her back right away."

I let out a purr and nuzzled my brother's head with my tail, amazed by how much of my father's rigidness he seemed to have. "Hm, alright," I mocked before beginning to finally follow after Lilypetal.

My mother was patiently waiting just a few fox-lengths away. "Okay," I meowed as I sat down in front of her. "You, me, Thornclaw and Swiftflight - we need to have another meeting."

For whatever reason, Lilypetal seemed slightly daunted by my statement, her hazel eyes briefly flashing with alarm as she flicked her ears.

I mean, it was fairly late notice, but I figured that the three cats who had been participating in these meetings with me would surely assume that we'd have one soon, considering the latest news we'd heard of the Dark Forest - the main thing we had been discussing amongst ourselves for many moons now. So, I found it somewhat strange that Lilypetal was so shaken by my words.

But despite that, she replied calmly. "Agreed," she murmured with a sharp nod. "When?"

I took a fast glance around the busy camp clearing, quickly

deducing that we likely wouldn't be able to make ourselves scarce for at least a little while. "As soon as possible," I thought out loud.

I then looked up to the sky that was just beginning to turn blue with the rising sun. "I'm thinking right as the sun is setting - slip out to the forest whenever you're free."

"Alright, that sounds good to me!" Lilypetal replied. I then tilted my head with curiosity as she began to shift her paws back and forth, and she broke her gaze from mine. "But we should make sure not to be out there too far into the night."

I narrowed my eyes back at her. "Why not?"

My mother gave a nervous shrug, and still didn't directly look at me. "I just want to make sure that we can all return to camp in time to get some sleep."

I couldn't help but let out a snort at that answer. "Sleep?" I repeated. "Since when do you care about sleeping so much?"

Lilypetal finally lifted her head to look into my eyes, but she still seemed a bit distant, and I could tell that she was trying her best not to give me a very snarky answer in reply to my very snarky question.

Well, it was still somewhat snarky, but luckily her tone was calm. "Besides the fact that I'm a living cat that needs to sleep in order to function?" she inquired, her gaze only slightly teasing.

She then looked away from me again. "Well, I mean..." she then went on after I'd given her a nod. "With a situation as urgent and trying as this, sleeping would be essential, wouldn't it?"

She then let out a sigh and gave the smallest shrug. "Well... it's at least essential to me right now."

I blinked and began to twitch my whiskers. *What in the name of StarClan is she talking about?*

I was about to ask this question to my mother out loud, but quickly shut my mouth again as she flashed me a warning look. It made me

more uneasy, considering that wasn't a look that she ever gave that often. But it had the slightest gleam of reassurance, and seemed to be saying - "Goldenshine, just leave it. You'll find out soon enough".

I slowly nodded, only having the smallest bit of understanding. "I see..." I murmured, half to myself before standing up and giving Lilypetal an inquisitive look, wanting to change the subject. "So, I'll see you tonight?"

Lilypetal seemed happy with the subject switch as well. "You can count on it," the tabby she-cat replied more calmly, dipping her head to me. Her hazel gaze then seemed to soften, and after she simply stared back at me for a moment, she gave me a lick on the cheek. "I love you."

I drank in my mother's sweet scent for a moment, forgetting about her slightly odd behavior for just a moment. "I love you too," I replied immediately.

I then began to pad away, flashing Lilypetal one last warm look. "I'll see you later!" I called back to her, leaving her to return to her group.

I then began to make my way through the camp once again in the search for my other parent. *Sleeping... sleeping? Why does Lilypetal care to think about sleeping once our meeting is finished?* I wondered, still a bit baffled by our conversation. *I mean, I like to sleep too, but it's certainly not the first thing I think to worry about!*

I then told myself that I needed to shake it off for the moment, my father's golden brown tabby pelt now in being in my sights.

I let out a sigh. *Hopefully she'll just explain herself tomorrow,* I convinced myself as I urgently ran up to Thornclaw, who was currently training with Brackenfur, Graystripe and Blossomfall.

I speedily repeated what I had said to Lilypetal, and was relieved to see him comply just as quickly as his mate had. "I'll be there," my father replied. He then let out a long sigh, his eyes full of uncertainty as he wrapped his tail around my back. "We'll certainly have a lot to discuss, won't we?"

I lied my head on my father's shoulder and sniffed. "No doubt about that!" I breathed. I then lifted my head back up so that I could meet Thornclaw's gaze again. "So that means that we should try and convene as quickly as possible - get away whenever you can."

I then found myself having to hold back a purr of amusement as I looked into Thornclaw's eyes, which were currently gleaming in the late dawn light. "What?" I asked, still purring anyway.

After a moment, my father shook his head quickly in reply. "Nothing," he meowed warmly. He then gave me another sharp nod. "That is fine. I can do that, Goldenshine."

I couldn't help but let out a small squeal of excitement. *Everyone can make it!* I thought cheerfully. *Thank StarClan! Time to unfold some more secrets.... hopefully.* "Okay, great!" I exclaimed as I touched noses with Thornclaw. "Goodbye, father!"

Thornclaw gently touched his muzzle to my ear. "Goodbye, you furball," he purred. He then pulled away, flashing me one last warm gaze. "See you tonight."

"See you tonight!" I replied, love and affection for my father welling up inside of me as I slowly padded away, now ready to get to my final stop.

The scariest, most unsettling one, I think.

Everything else was practically blind around me as I began to travel through the camp yet again - my eyes directly set on the medicine den just a little ways in front of me. *Lately, I've been so incredibly nervous to enter a place that's meant to bring cats comfort*, I joked to myself as I approached the bramble screen that served as the den's entrance.

I then let out a sigh as I slowly crawled through. *Well... I suppose I have somewhat of a right to be.*

I nervously and reluctantly entered the medicine den to find exactly what I had expected. In fact - better than I had expected.

I came all the way inside of the den to find Jayfeather pacing about

the area, and he was completely alone. The medicine cat was still suspended from his duties, but I had assumed - apparently assumed right - that he'd come here to gather his thoughts, just as he did when he served as healer.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of anxiety at the sight of the gray tabby tom, even despite this visit being something I had already planned on doing. And with the Dark Forest news, it was now even more necessary of a visit than it had been before.

Almost instantly after I had made my way into the medicine den, Jayfeather stopped in his tracks, clearly sensing my presence. I simply watched, my heart beginning to beat faster as he narrowed his blind eyes and turned his head to look in my direction.

"Hi," he muttered simply.

I shifted uncomfortably in my place and looked down at my paws. "Hi," I replied back.

I then forced myself to continue on, despite how awkward and tense the atmosphere already felt. "So..." I murmured after a sigh as I sat down. "This... this is it, isn't it?"

Jayfeather sat down as well, his eyes still unreadable and dark. "...'it'?"

I quickly nodded back at the tom, for some reason feeling like I needed to even though he couldn't see it. "'It'... this darkness that you have to face," I explained to the tom, recalling the words that Hollyleaf had said to me some days ago. "That you, Lionblaze, and Dovewing have to use your powers to face."

I then stood up so that I could take a step closer to the medicine cat. "This is all apart of your prophecy, isn't it?"

Jayfeather simply let out a huff and lashed his tail. "I'd give you an answer," he muttered bitterly, almost as if he was trying to hold back a hiss, "but I'd rather not have to directly acknowledge it again."

I stared back at the tabby tom in concern, my heart beginning to

well up with sympathy. "...I understand," I nearly whispered, before sitting down again. "Great StarClan, it... it all must be so scary for you."

I then let out a sniff. "*I'm* scared, and all I have to do is have some battle moves ready."

Jayfeather snorted and stood back up, beginning to pad towards the back of the den. "Hm, thanks for the sympathy," he murmured sarcastically.

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help but feel a twinge of happiness, seeing as Jayfeather was letting his snide remarks come out despite how distant we'd become lately. "Oh, come on. You know that's not what I meant," I groaned.

I then stood up, watching as Jayfeather began to mess with Leafpool's herb stocks. "I'm just saying that... wow, this must be a big deal for you."

Jayfeather paused in his work for just a moment. "It is," he replied.

After a few heartbeats, he just slightly turned his head to look over his shoulder, revealing his uncertain, uneasy blue eyes. "Really big," he then meowed more gravely, sending a chill down my spine.

But despite that, I was practically overwhelmed with concern and commiseration for the gray tabby tom. I couldn't even begin to comprehend or imagine how I'd handle his situation - something so powerful that no cats in the past had been able to defy, was now the responsibility of three Clan cats. *Well, I suppose I'd handle it to the best of my abilities, even if it were so unknown and scary,* I thought. *Just as I'm trying to do with Snowstorm.*

I then flicked my ears, that thought reminding me of the primary reason I'd needed to speak with Jayfeather in the first place.

Even though the two of us had now stood in the medicine den in silence for many, many moments, I forced myself to speak up once again, taking advantage of the fact that we'd just been able to somewhat make conversation. *And possibly establish something along*

the lines of a friendship again...

But I refused to meet Jayfeather's gaze. "She knows," I murmured, letting my head fall to the ground.

Out of my peripheral vision, I could see Jayfeather's paws pausing once again. "She knows?" he repeated, his voice revealing genuine confusion as he looked back at me. "What do you mean? Who knows?"

I took a deep breath and stood up straight. "Snowstorm, Jayfeather," I answered evenly. "She knows. I told her."

I watched as the medicine cat's eyes slowly widened. "Snowstorm..." he breathed after a heartbeat of silence. "...about herself?"

I then quickly nodded back at Jayfeather as I began to well up with panic, suddenly feeling like I needed to explain myself. "I had to, Jayfeather," I insisted, my voice higher with worry. "I don't think either of us realized just how much her destiny was burdening her - trying to send her signs that she didn't even understand. And there was no way that she could understand them. Not unless it was to be all laid out for her."

I then stood up, trying to keep my chin high - for my sake as much as Jayfeather's. "So, I did," I tried to meow more confidently. "I told her about Snowflight. I took her to the places she'd been dreaming about, and..."

I then took another step closer to Jayfeather. "She understands," I went on, my voice breathy with awe, relief, and excitement, "and she's ready to take on Snowflight's destiny. Whatever it is."

To my dismay, Jayfeather's eyes were completely unreadable as I looked back at him, desperate to hear what he had to say. "I see..." was all that he murmured.

I found myself growing more and more antsy as I continued to internally plead for Jayfeather's thoughts. It was times like this where I wished that I could have his power of walking in other cats' minds. *I mean... is he proud of me at all? Proud that I did it without*

him?

I found myself talking further, hopefully further invoking a response.. "It was so terrifying, but being Snowflight's sister helps immensely, just as I thought it would..." I went on. I then let out a sigh and let myself feel a bit of pride. "And I managed to do it all on my own."

I was then utterly shocked and startled as Jayfeather whipped his head around, revealing blazing blue eyes. "Well, that's just absolutely fantastic for you, isn't it?" he growled back at me.

What in the name of...? I nearly took a step back. "*Excuse* me?" I meowed in complete surprise. "Jayfeather-"

"I can't believe you - meowing on like that right in front of me," Jayfeather continued, standing up and completely facing me. It was almost as if I hadn't spoken at all. "I mean, why are you so determined to prove that you can do this without me?"

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. "Where in the name of StarClan did you get that impression?" I demanded to the tom. I then let out an exasperated sigh and rolled my eyes. "Jayfeather, I've tried to explain this to you countless times already."

"Well, your so-called *explanations* mean nothing to me, Goldenshine," Jayfeather hissed tautly, his tail twitching behind him.

My eyes slowly narrowed down into slits as I tried to push down frustration, and sadness too. "I can see that."

I then watched as Jayfeather seemed to want to growl another spitting retort at me, but he quickly cut himself off. Instead, he let out a hiss and whipped himself around. "Whatever," he muttered, sitting down once he completely faced away from me. "I suppose I have to acknowledge the fact that you've made your point."

My mouth fell open in amazement. I might as well have been talking to Swiftflight as a kit. "What *point*, Jayfeather?"

The medicine cat didn't reply immediately. "The point that..." he

began after a heartbeat. He then trailed off, and let out yet another hiss. "Forget it."

With that, I wanted to run up to Jayfeather's side and demand to hear what he had been about to say, but I used all of my willpower to stay back. *As much as Jayfeather would think so... snapping at each other and arguing about something over and over won't get us anywhere.*

I closed my eyes slowly, and let out a sigh to fill up the silence that had overcome the medicine den once again. "Jayfeather, listen..." I meowed more softly, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry. You know that this decision of mine wasn't a selfish one." I then lowered my head, trying to push down my guilt. "At least... it wasn't meant to be."

I then sat back down, taking a few moments to wait for any sort of reply.

And when I quickly realized that it would never come, I decided that I would just leave, and leave Jayfeather in peace. *Well, not even peace,* I thought, only half-joking. *In solitude, I suppose.*

I then turned around, and hesitantly began to leave the medicine den, my tail dragging the ground in sadness. *He's not proud at all,* I thought. *He's so set on the fact that he's not doing this with me, and nothing else. He's done nothing but support me, in his own strange way. I gave him valid reasoning as to why he shouldn't do this with me. So... what is his problem?*

I paused for a moment, and took one last glance back at the medicine cat. *It's just as he said,* I thought, then turning around and making my exit once again. *Forget it.*

"Make sure that she is ready."

I stopped in my tracks at the sound of Jayfeather's voice, and looked over my shoulder. "What?" I questioned him. "Who?"

Jayfeather stood up, turning away from the herb stocks and facing me. "Snowstorm."

"Snowstorm?" I repeated, my heart beginning to beat faster as I

padded up to Jayfeather. "...Ready for what?"

Jayfeather's eyes were dark, but filled with certainty as he looked back at me. "Make sure that she is ready for this battle - as ready as anyone else," he answered gravely. "I think that this battle carries her destiny just as well as it does mine."

Chapter 26

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Everything was going as planned. At least, that is what I was trying to tell myself over and over.

Although many, many of my fellow Clanmates had just had their eyes opened earlier in the day, I had anticipated this, unfortunately, for many moons now.

In those many moons, I had almost hoped that all of the subtle hints that Ashfur had dropped, all of those huge, heavy threats that he had thrown at me could have all been empty ones. Firestar's announcement to his Clan had obviously proved that this wasn't the case at all.

And, for some reason, it almost gave me a sense of relief.

While the anticipation had been scary – utterly terrifying, it was bringing an opportunity for something absolutely wonderful to happen. *Well... wonderful for one cat, and not another.*

It was all coming together.

And although it had been a long time coming for me, it still felt as if there wasn't enough time to plan. I couldn't even begin to describe the amount of panic I'd felt as soon as the words "Dark Forest" had slid out of my leader's jaws. *I need to act fast,* I thought urgently each time I recalled my plan. *Really fast. I must do it before the Dark Forest cats even arrive!*

These thoughts were practically spiraling inside of my head, thrashing around like a hummingbird trapped inside of my skull as I stood alone in the ThunderClan forest, waiting for the rest of my family to arrive.

This meeting that Goldenshine had initiated was obviously something much more current, but I was awaiting it just as anxiously as I had been for the announcement of the Dark Forest's arrival. *This is either going to go very, very well, or we'll end it feeling just as apprehensive and unsure as we were before...* I thought as I shifted uncomfortably in my spot. *Or StarClan forbid, end it with every cat wanting to shred my fur apart...*

I had only been waiting for what felt like a few heartbeats when I heard some quiet stirring come from some bramble bushes up ahead. I flicked my ears and quickly shifted my gaze, immediately recognizing Swiftflight as he stealthily slid through the shrubs, the blazing bright setting sun reflecting against his sleek pelt.

His eyes seemed to flash with surprise as his gaze fell on me. "Lilypetal!" he breathed as he made his way into the clearing. "Hi."

I gave the younger tom a nod and lashed my tail in greeting. "Hi, Swiftflight!" I meowed kindly to my kin, a bit of laughter in my voice as I scanned my eyes around the forest. "Seems that we're the most punctual of the family!"

"I suppose so," Swiftflight replied curtly, sitting down and wrapping his tail around his paws. "I'm surprised that I was able to get away so easily, if I'm being honest."

"Oh, yeah?" I purred, giving the tom a teasing, inquiring look. "Brambleclaw and Firestar sure have you busy, huh?"

Swiftflight let out a long sigh in reply. "Yes," he breathed, his voice revealing a bit of exasperation, for whatever reason. "Really, really busy."

I tried to hide my curiosity as I observed the tom's seemingly tense, very stressed demeanor. He was sitting perfectly still, yet it appeared as if he had all the energy to leap to the top of a tree with one jump. "Well, I suppose that's what you get for deciding to be so truthful!" I tried to meow lightheartedly, referring to his choice of revealing his Dark Forest past to ThunderClan. "But the fact that they trust you with all of this is really, really great."

I then took a step closer to the dark gray tom, attempting to search his gaze that was slightly hidden as he looked off to the side. I then flashed him a concerned look as I murmured, "Or... at least, I'd hope?"

After a few heartbeats, Swiftflight finally glanced back at me, and proceeded to shake his head quickly. "No... yes!" he then stammered as he sat up straight once again. "Yes, it really is great. I'm very relieved to see that they trust me."

I was then surprised to see that the younger tom seemed to be suppressing a hiss, and I wondered if I was even supposed to hear his next words. "And if they don't, they're at least making the *effort* to," he muttered under his breath.

Whether or not I was supposed to hear it, I still replied, pushing down my curiosity about the meaning behind the tom's words. "As they should be," I insisted to my kin.

I then found myself turning around and looking out deeper into the forest, now shadowy as the sun continued to set, and its light that remained leaking through the branches on casting onto the ground. "At this point, no cat can really play around, can they?" I murmured. "All cats can really do right now is trust each other."

I then began to pace the area, suddenly feeling like I needed to move. "It's as Firestar said - if we use this attack to take advantage of each other, all will be lost."

I then sat down after a few moments, feeling my heart beginning to beat faster, and my fur beginning to bristle. "We have to trust each other," I went on, my voice now barely above a whisper, "and believe that what each cat is doing is for the greater good..." *And trust in that in ourselves as well...*

I glanced back at Swiftflight a moment after my words, only expecting to find an even, calm gaze looking back at me. But I was shocked to see that the tom's gray-blue eyes seem surprised, yet dark and thoughtful. It was if he'd understood the meaning behind every word I'd just said - words that I'd not only said to reassure him, but myself.

I then nearly took a step back as Swiftflight took a deep breath and stood up, his eyes still dark and curious, but now more determined. "...Lilypetal-"

Whatever the tom had been about to say was quickly interrupted when suddenly another rustle came from another clump of bushes just fox-lengths away. Swiftflight and I exchanged a glance and then looked to the bushes just as two golden brown tabby pelts came into sight.

Goldenshine made her way out first, taking a pause to stretch out and let out a relieved sigh. "Great StarClan, I wondered if I'd ever get away!" she exclaimed. "Apparently I'm the best at the front paw blow, and I had to teach it to Emberpaw and Lightningpaw, who hadn't even learned a piece of the move yet!" I then held back a purr of amusement as she flashed me a panicked, reassuring look. "I was happy to, but goodness, did it take a while!"

I then heard Thornclaw let out a sniff as he slid out from behind his daughter. "Are you sure that you're not just a bad mentor?" he teased, his pale blue eyes full of mischief.

Goldenshine exchanged an amused glance with her father. "Doubtful," she muttered. She then nodded to Swiftflight and I as Thornclaw *mrrowed* with laughter. "Have you all been waiting long?"

"Not at all," I immediately replied, giving Goldenshine a quick lick on the cheek, and touching my nose to Thornclaw's as they both ran up to meet me. "I got here just as the sun was setting, and Swiftflight wasn't too far behind me."

I then watched as Goldenshine let out another sigh, backed up a few pawsteps, and sat down. "Good. That's good," she breathed. She then nodded to her father, who had settled down between her and me. "I ran into Thornclaw on my way here, who, for some reason, looked as paranoid as a mouse about to be preyed on."

I looked back at my mate to find him shaking his head slowly, seemingly not too amused by Goldenshine's metaphor. "It just feels strange to leave camp at a time like this, I suppose," he explained,

his muscular shoulders beginning to tense up. "*Selfish*, almost. A cat wandering on their own right now would probably seem very strange."

A chill nearly ran down my spine at Thornclaw's words. "That's true..." I murmured, nervously glancing at the three other cats with me. "Hopefully we aren't missed. We should maybe try to return to camp by moonhigh."

I then nearly froze as I met Goldenshine's stern, hard gaze. I was almost certain that her eyes would be able to burn straight through my head and show my thoughts, some that would reveal that my need to return to camp wasn't just for the sake of not want to be missed.

"We'll be fine," she insisted tautly after a moment. She then flicked her gaze up to the milky orange sky. "This is separate from the rest of the Clan, but I'd like to think that it's pretty important as well."

I then nervously looked to Thornclaw, and found that he was looking back at me, his eyes revealing concern through their narrow slits. "That may be so..." he began as he shifted his gaze to look to Goldenshine. "But I agree with your mother that we shouldn't be away from our Clanmates for too long."

I hoped that I was hiding my immense relief somewhat well as I nodded in agreement. *It already appears as if cats are suspicious of me, and we haven't even begun discussing the Dark Forest yet!* I thought worriedly.

But I forced those thoughts away as I heard Thornclaw speak again, simply breathing, "So..." as he scanned his gaze over Goldenshine, Swiftflight and me.

"So..." I repeated as the golden brown tabby tom met my gaze.

"So..." Goldenshine then sighed out, first exchanging a nervous glance with Swiftflight, and then shrugging over at Thornclaw and I. "Here we are."

I continued to try and push down my anxiety as I shrugged back at

my daughter. "Here we are," I meowed, shaking my head slowly. "My goodness, where do we even begin?"

Goldenshine's gray eyes slowly began to narrow, and I tried to keep still rather than squirm uncomfortably. "Great question..." she muttered, tilting her head to the side. "How about you start, Lilypetal?"

"I suppose..." I could barely stand to look at my daughter's clearly suspicious, scheming gaze, so I broke mine from hers and gave a single lash of my tail. "Or, you could start! You were the one who initiated this meeting, after all!" *That's a logical excuse, isn't it?* I asked myself fretfully. *Well, let's hope so.*

Goldenshine didn't reply for a few heartbeats. "I guess you're right," she eventually sighed, seemingly giving up on getting anything out of me for the moment. "Well... I just figured that we'd need to regroup after hearing what Firestar said about the Dark Forest."

She then let her gray eyes rest on each of her family members for a moment. "I mean, each of us have had our personal battles with different aspects of it for a long time now."

Thornclaw let out a contemptuous snort from where he sat beside me. "Now, it appears as if the Dark Forest wants to make their side of the battle a little... *less* personal."

"I don't even understand how those mouse-brains managed to be able to bring themselves down into the living world in the first place," Swiftflight hissed bitterly. He then nodded to Thornclaw, his gray-blue eyes dark and solemn. "We'll be able to touch them, interact with them and fight with them just as we did when we trained with them?"

Thornclaw seemed to think for a moment before answering his younger kin. "We were dreaming, yet we were just as tangible to them as we would be to cats here," he soon replied. "So... what's to say that the opposite isn't true?"

I then flicked my ears in surprise as Thornclaw gestured to me with his tail. "I mean, we already know that it's completely possible," my

mate went on. "Lilypetal has seen Ashfur on our territory a couple of times."

Another shiver ran down my spine as I recalled the moments that Thornclaw was referring to - the first time being when Thornclaw and I had taken a walk through the leaf-bare forest, the day I'd found out that Thornclaw wasn't training in the Dark Forest anymore; and just moments after the cats I was currently sitting with had closed off our first meeting.

I had mentioned both occurrences to Thornclaw, Goldenshine and Swiftflight, and they clearly recalled them just as well as I did. "That's right..." Swiftflight murmured in response to Thornclaw's words.

I gave the dark gray tom a nod of acknowledgement, wondering if I was just imagining the speculation in his eyes. "It is... but at that point, he was simply a faded spirit. I couldn't touch him," I explained, feeling my fur begin to bristle as I pictured the gray-speckled tom standing in these very woods. "But now... it appears as if that's changing."

I then flashed Thornclaw a half-humored, half-uncertain look. "Surely the Dark Forest spirits wouldn't come here to attack us with their words, would they?"

"Definitely not," Thornclaw replied after he'd sniffed with amusement. "I hate to admit that they're smarter than that - smart enough to know to use their claws, and..."

I then watched as my mate's claws slowly slid out. "...and smart enough to know how to access the living world."

Goldenshine looked just as apprehensive by the tom's words as I felt. "Body and soul?" she nearly whispered.

"As close as they could get."

"So..." Goldenshine then meowed, having shut her eyes for just a moment. "We might as well be fighting an entire Clan of malicious, angry, vengeful cats that are just as alive as we are."

"That's exactly what we're doing," Swiftflight murmured gravely, his meow only a bit irritable.

Goldenshine exchanged another glance with her son, and then looked worriedly back at Thornclaw and I. "But we're ready for them, right?"

"Of course we are," I reassured my daughter, almost reassuring myself more than her. "I mean, we *will* be. Firestar and Brambleclaw are going to make sure that every single ThunderClan cat is confident in their abilities." *I can be certain of that, I suppose. But even so, is it enough?*

I then shook my head quickly. *Of course it is.*

"I'm told that one cat will need to be more ready that anyone else."

All eyes immediately went to Goldenshine with her words. "What?" Thornclaw pressed to his daughter. "Who?"

As Goldenshine seemed to be searching for her words, Swiftflight stared intently and expectantly back at her. "Snowstorm?" the younger tom prompted, taking a step closer to her. "Right?"

My golden brown tabby daughter finally gave a nod, and she shook out her fur as if she was trying to shake off something that was bothering her. "Yes, it is," she answered grimly. "And I'm told that she needs to be ready for this battle."

"But, surely everyone does, right?" I asked Goldenshine fearfully despite already knowing the answer.

And it was the answer that Goldenshine gave me. "If that was the case, then I'm not sure if Jayfeather would actually take the time to tell me that," she murmured, her voice slightly taut.

She then took a deep breath and looked out into the forest. "Her destiny is drawing near..." she went on. "And now, she knows about it."

I then twitched my whiskers in surprise as Swiftflight whirled himself around to fully face Goldenshine, his eyes wide. "Wait, she

knows about it?" he meowed. "You told her? You actually did it?"

Thornclaw and I exchanged a slightly confused glance - clearly there had been some transaction that the two of us had missed. "What do you mean, she actually did it?" Thornclaw questioned Swiftflight. "Did *what?*"

Swiftflight let his fur lie flat again and turned to face me and my mate. "Well, Snowstorm has been confiding in me about all of the strange dreams she'd been having, and while I knew what they could mean, I didn't feel as if it were my place to tell her," the tom explained, shrugging. "I did tell her that speaking with Goldenshine about it might be a good idea, and... it appears as if she did."

He then let out a snort and lightly pawed at a leaf that lied just in front of him. "Well, now I know why she randomly thanked me on our way back to camp this morning..."

Goldenshine gave her son an affectionate nudge. "As she should have thanked you," she purred before letting out a huff and shaking her head slowly. "My goodness, it was so clear even after just a few moments how much Snowflight and her past was almost... *haunting* her, without her even knowing it. I figured that telling Snowstorm about Snowflight would at least bring her some peace of mind."

"And it has. I can see it already," Swiftflight insisted to his mother. His gaze then washed over with apprehension and uncertainty as he murmured, "Does she realize what this battle could bring for her?"

Goldenshine sighed yet again, closing her eyes. "I figure that she's beginning to put the pieces together."

"Surely she's scared?"

"Oh, absolutely. She told me that she was," Goldenshine replied. "But many times, determination and willingness overshadow any lack of courage. I see that in her."

At those words, I let out a long sigh and looked back at Thornclaw, meeting his sorrowful blue gaze. "Sounds like Snowflight to me," I nearly whispered, my heart suddenly feeling as heavy as my entire

body. *As much as I wish that StarClan had chosen another cat to send away, they could not have made a better choice.*

"Undoubtedly," Goldenshine whispered back after my words.

After a few heartbeats of silence, I watched as my daughter pricked her ears and glanced back up at the sky, which was now flitted with the stars of Silverpelt, the moon slowly rising up to join them. "Wow, it already looks as if moonhigh is approaching," Goldenshine observed.

She then looked back down, revealing suspicious, interrogational gray eyes once again as she stared back at me. "Wanting to return to camp so that you can get some sleep, Lilypetal?"

Oh no, she did not!

I could see Thornclaw lashing his tail and cocking an eyebrow as I flashed Goldenshine an astonished look. "Pardon?"

Goldenshine padded forward so that she was standing just in front of the two of us. "I asked mother if she wanted to get back to ThunderClan so that she could sleep," she explained as she sat down. "She seemed quite worried about that when I brought up having this meeting so late in the day."

Thornclaw then shifted in his spot so that he could face me. "Did you, now?" he questioned me, his own gaze beginning to reflect his daughter's.

For a moment, I was too daunted to even say anything. I figured that I would have needed to eventually reveal certain things to these three cats, but I still felt utterly blindsided by my daughter's interrogation.

"She made it sound like it was pretty essential," Goldenshine pressed on when I continued to hesitate. A glint of satisfaction then seemed to shine in her narrowed eyes as she took a step closer to me. "Did you get a couple of naps in even while you were stuck in the Twolegplace?"

My shock at Goldenshine's words were quickly replaced with

bewilderment and anger. "Hey - watch it, Goldenshine," I demanded to my daughter sharply, standing up. "I'd hope that you know that you're just entertaining yourself with these notions."

"I'd hope so too," Thornclaw murmured. I could feel his gaze burning into me as he also stood up. "But I still wonder why sleep was a worry for you, I'll admit..."

I closed my eyes after my mate's words, finally taking a moment to collect myself and my thoughts. I tried to thank StarClan that Goldenshine had actually given me the opportunity to say what I needed to to my kin, rather than grow angry because of how she had done it.

I then let out a sigh. *It's time for this plan to actually be spoken aloud, rather than bouncing around in my own head, like it has been for a bit now - since I spoke to Squirrelflight... since I was taken by Twolegs...* I told myself. *Well, I will speak of part of it, at least.*

I then took a deep breath, and lifted my gaze from the ground so that I could actually look at my kin. "Well, I suppose that anyone would wonder, because..." I then found my gaze falling on Swiftflight, who was staring back at me through narrowed eyes. "It is a bit strange. Unfortunately... there is something that I need to do that can only be done in sleep."

"What?"

I whipped my head to the side, looking at Thornclaw as he spoke. I took a step closer to him and ran my tail down his flank, instantly feeling like I needed to give him reassurance. "Lilypetal, what do you mean?" my mate pressed, his eyes wide with worry.

I shrugged, hesitating once again as I tried to find my words. "Well, something that... that may seem crazy," I murmured, "but it's the only way that I can do what I need to do."

"What you need to do?" Swiftflight repeated, standing up in his spot just a couple of tail-lengths away. "What *do* you need to do?"

I had to close my eyes again for another few moments, absolutely

terrified of the words I would hear following my next ones. *But there's no turning back now,* I reminded myself. *And I'm not going to lie, either. Especially since I'm not sharing everything with them. I can't right now.*

I slowly opened my eyes again. *Here we go.* "I need to speak with Ashfur in the Dark Forest," I finally meowed, trying to keep my voice even. "It can't wait until we meet in the battle."

My words were immediately met with hisses of protest, just as I had expected. "What?" Goldenshine instantly exclaimed, exchanging a completely horrified glance with Thornclaw. "Lilypetal, are you out of your mind? What do you even have to say to him?"

"And what could he have to say to you?" Thornclaw growled as he padded forward to face me. He then let out a grudging snort. "Nothing probably - he'd leap at you and rip your throat out before you could even use it to speak!"

I sat in my place, trying my best to stay calm despite two cats that I loved dearly yelling in my face. "I've got a bit more of a hold on him than that," I muttered through gritted teeth.

"But-"

"This is something that I must do," I insisted sharply, standing up. I then shifted my gaze back and forth from Thornclaw to Goldenshine, my hazel eyes hard, but reassuring. "I understand that you all are worried, but nothing is going to hold me back."

"But, what are you even doing?" Goldenshine then demanded, her voice cracking with fear. "Lilypetal, I hope that you know that whatever it is, we're not letting you do it on your own. No secrets, remember?"

I couldn't help but let out a sigh. *The "no secrets" pact...* I thought, recalling the agreement the four of us had made at our first meeting, having realized all of the things we'd been hiding from each other. *But... I have to keep part of this a secret if I want them to be safe.* "I do remember," I replied grimly to Goldenshine, hardly being able to bear seeing her dismayed gray eyes. "But I have to do

it alone. It's too risky, you might..."

I then trailed off for a moment, having to push back anxiety and fear. I shook my head quickly and gave a sharp nod. "I have to do it on my own."

"Foxdung to that!" Thornclaw growled, looking angrier than I had seen him in quite a long time, his pale blue eyes blazing back at me. "Lilypetal, Goldenshine is right. We're in this together, remember?"

I then watched as my mate took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After a moment, his lids opened again and revealed a softer, more troubled gaze. "I hope that you know that we're going to be right behind you through anything that you face," he meowed more gently as he padded up to me, our muzzles just a mouse-length's distance apart.

I couldn't help but let the purr rising in my throat come out as my mate then bent his head forward to touch his muzzle to mine, and his scent flooded through my nostrils. "I will, at least," he whispered to me.

Goldenshine then ran up to stand next to her father as he pulled his muzzle away. "We all will," she meowed to me, her eyes determined and warm.

Swiftflight hesitated for just a moment before padding up to stand on his mother's other side. "Agreed," he muttered.

I was practically overwhelmed with love as I stared back at the three cats in front of me - three cats, among many others, that loved me unconditionally. Who loved me despite my crazy ideas, despite my determination that sometimes brought me to these crazy ideas. *A family that wants to stand beside me despite anything at all... I can't even begin to describe how lucky I am...* I thought, feeling my eyes begin to well up with emotion. *All the more reason that I need to protect them. All the more reason why I must do this by myself.*

"I know that you are," I finally replied to Thornclaw, Goldenshine, and Swiftflight, my voice surprisingly hoarse as I let my gaze rest on each of them. "All the more reason why I can't let you all do this

with me."

I took a step closer to them, raising my tail up in the air before any of them could protest. "This is all about companionship, right?" I reminded them, letting my voice grow sharper again. "Well, a part of companionship is trust. We have to trust each other."

Thornclaw took a step closer to me, his eyes wide with dismay and fear once again. "Trust that you're going to put yourself in danger without any help?"

I let my gaze rest on him as I replied. "No. Trust that I know what I'm doing," I answered calmly. "I'd like to think that I've proven that I do several times in the past."

Then, without waiting for any other possible protest, I turned around and began to pad quickly in the direction of camp. I beckoned the others with my tail in the hopes that they'd follow. "Goldenshine is right - moonhigh is fast approaching. We need to get back to camp before we're missed."

~>~>~>~>~>~>~

I was currently alone, staring up at the leafless trees that loomed over me; feeling uneased at the sight of a dark sky with no stars.

I almost felt sure that I was going to begin sinking down into the muddy ground below me from how still I was standing. I was trying with all of my might not to move, in the fear that if I did so, I would feel inclined to pelt out of the clearing, all the way to StarClan, maybe.

But I knew that I had to stay exactly where I was.

For the first time in my whole life, I had actually been relieved to see my eyes open to the gloominess and the shadows of the Dark Forest. But that certainly didn't stop me from growing more and more uneasy the longer that I stood in its territory.

The only thing keeping me going at this point was the thought of how long I had been waiting to be here, and what I could possibly get out of being here. *I've given it all too much thought to give up now.*

And I can't even begin to imagine what will happen if it all works out.

I then forced myself to stay calm and take a deep breath as I heard the rattling of bushes sound from behind. *This would all be worth it.*

"Sightseeing, huh?"

I slowly turned around to face the gray-speckled tom that had made his way into the clearing where I waited. "Hardly," I muttered back to Ashfur. "I'd rather stare at a frog's rotting corpse."

My ears then flicked in surprise as another large, muscular figure made their way into the clearing - the dark brown tabby tom I now completely recognized as Tigerstar. "And yet, you are here," the former ShadowClan leader observed, his amber eyes narrowing as a smirk emerged across his face. "Why?"

I rolled my eyes as Ashfur let out a purr of amusement. "I certainly could guess," the tom meowed smugly as he tilted his head to the side. "Are you here to beg and plead for us not to make our attack on the Clans? To look inside of ourselves and into our hearts so that we can realize how wrong what we're doing is?"

"Hm. I'm not that stupid," I murmured emotionlessly back at Ashfur. "Surely you all would agree with me that that's a lost cause."

I simply watched as Ashfur and Tigerstar exchanged an amused glance. "Smart cat," Ashfur murmured as he stood up and began to pad up to me. "I'll say that I'm actually quite glad to see you, Lilypetal. You're a reminder of why I'm even here in the first place; a factor in why I am deciding to fight alongside these cats at all."

I let myself take a step back as Ashfur's gaze hardened and his gray fur began to rise. "Because of former Clanmates that I have felt betrayed by, who took away what could have been," he hissed tautly before letting his fur lie flat again, and his gaze washed over with mischief and wonder. "But, I am just as curious as Tigerstar as to why you're here, however."

I simply shrugged back at the Dark Forest warrior, hoping that I was continuing to mask every sign of distress that I felt. "As you

should be, I suppose."

Tigerstar then slowly padded up to stand next to Ashfur. "You made it sound as if you were never coming back when you rejected our proposition," he recalled.

"Yes, I did."

"You seemed to think that it would be selfish to associate yourself with us at all..." Ashfur then meowed, his gaze hard on me. I then forced myself to stay in place as he took yet another pawstep towards me. "Even though, surely you'd be saving many, many cats by agreeing to do so?"

I said nothing, and only stared back into Ashfur's malevolent, harsh blue eyes.

"Have you even wondered the possibilities of what could happen come our attack?" Ashfur went on when I didn't immediately reply. "Things will be just as they were when I was alive - when all of us were - able to pick off any cat that I wish to. And gee, are there many cats to choose from!"

Ashfur's gaze then managed to grow even more dark and malicious. "So many that would cause you endless suffering if they were to be lost to you," he whispered, a sick smile beginning to form on his face as he leaned his head close to mine. "You know by now that Snowflight was just the beginning."

The gray-speckled tom then began to pace the area as Tigerstar watched, his amber eyes bright with an ominous kind of satisfaction. "Oh, how wonderful it would be..." Ashfur mused. "To finally avenge my own death by killing Goldenshine..."

I unsheathed my claws, letting them sink deep into the ground as I gathered all of the courage and strength I had to speak again, ruthlessly trying to ignore the words that might as well have put a physical wound on my heart. "Ashfur."

"Maybe kill Thornclaw for good this time..."

"Ashfur."

"Make sure that those kits of yours actually drown in that lake..."

"Ashfur!" I nearly growled this time. "Can you give me the utmost pleasure of shutting your mouth for a few moments?"

Ashfur abruptly stopped in his tracks, and several moments of silence followed my words as he exchanged yet another glance with Tigerstar. "To what benefit?"

I took a deep breath and stood up. "I suppose you'll have to wait and see, won't you?" I meowed evenly back at him as I watched the tom's eyes widen with shock and disbelief. "It's a deal."

Chapter 27

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I could hear nothing but the chirps of crickets and the quiet stirs of cats from where I sat in ThunderClan's camp - the camp that had been utter chaos just moments ago, and was now empty and completely calm. Or, at least, it *seemed* that way. Everything seemed so still and serene, I almost wondered if Firestar's announcement, all of the training, and the meeting with my kin had all been a dream.

I was the only one in the moon-lit stone hollow clearing except for Dustystorm and Hazeltail, who were standing guard by the camp entrance many fox-lengths away. Everyone else had gone to their dens, finally taking some time to rest. *Because what's the point of integrating battle training at all if you're sleep deprived?*

After our small gathering out in the forest, Goldenshine, Lilypetal, Thornclaw and I had tried to get back to camp as quickly as we could, but we had been surprised to find that training actually seemed to be winding down, and were beginning to head off to their dens after the grueling training they'd just endured.

I had simply watched as Lilypetal, Thornclaw and Goldenshine decided to do the same. And, as they had been doing for the entirety of our travel back, Thornclaw and Goldenshine continued to reprimand Lilypetal - expressing their worry at what she insisted that she needed to do.

I hadn't been able to catch the tabby-and-white she-cat's words as she'd whirled herself around just in front of the warriors den to face her mate and her daughter. Her hazel gaze was stern, but sincere and full of assurance as she spoke.

And whatever she said, it actually caused both Thornclaw and Goldenshine to both slowly let their jaws shut, and they simply

watched as Lilypetal turned back around and made her way into the warriors den. A few heartbeats later, the two of them exchanged a fearful, troubled glance before walking into the warriors den.

My eyes then fell directly on Thornclaw, who was now staring after his mate as he followed her in. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy and sorrow for the golden brown tabby tom, who looked completely terrified.

Yet, his eyes didn't reveal any sort of wariness. In fact, he looked just as certain as Lilypetal had when she'd spoken to them, and when she'd made her case to us earlier, saying that speaking to Ashfur in the Dark Forest was something that she had to do. Why she'd ever want to take the time to speak with that fox-heart, I couldn't even begin to guess.

And even though she hadn't given us the direct reason, Thornclaw didn't even seem to need it. *He trusts her. He believes every word that she said,* I realized, a chill running down my spine. *He hates that he does, but... he does.*

But I supposed that I was trying to do the same. I obviously had not known Lilypetal as long as Thornclaw and Goldenshine have, but I had quickly noticed her great deal of intelligence and sense, even as a very young kit. Some of her decisions in the past had only seemed impulsive because they were risky. *She'd know to not tread her paws where they're not supposed to be, right?* I wondered. *She wouldn't go to the Dark Forest if she didn't have a good reason to.*

I then had twitched my whiskers and narrowed my eyes. *Yet... according to Ivypool, she may have been there at least once before.*

I glanced back at the warriors den, from where I now stood just a little ways away, feeling much too preoccupied and scattered to even try and sleep. *I wonder if she's gone to sleep? Has she gone to the Dark Forest yet?*

I then shifted my gaze over to the apprentices den, and all of my uncertainty and concern for my kin suddenly vanished as my eyes fell on the entrance, where I knew that a certain ginger tabby pelt was curled up in a nest.

A certain ginger tabby pelt that I now felt as closed-off from as I had before, and that thought practically overwhelmed me with hurt and regret. *I wonder how she's feeling? Does she feel as horrible and unhappy as I do?* I thought worriedly.

I then let out a quiet hiss and shook my head quickly. *Well, who wouldn't feel that way when someone doesn't seem to reciprocate their feelings for them? Even though... it's not... it's not like that.*

I then found myself beginning to stand up. *And it's my fault that she doesn't know that,* I told myself, actually taking a couple pawsteps forward. *I need to-*

I then abruptly stopped in my tracks and sat back down. *-calm down,* I finished for myself. *Great StarClan, why am I letting all of this bother me so much? Why can't I get anything having to do with Cherrypaw and our situation out of my head? And since Poppyfrost forced us apart, it's gotten so much worse. Why does it hurt so much for Cherrypaw to not be with... friends with me? Why do I hate that I couldn't speak to her or Poppyfrost like I wanted?*

I then let out a frustrated huff. *So what if I can't say certain things to her right now?* I went on. *I need to focus on the current threat. I'm supposed to be using my Dark Forest training to help my Clanmates, and prove that I truly want to fight beside them.*

I then shook out my fur as another wave of sadness and guilt threatened to rise up inside of me. *That is all that should be consuming my mind right now.*

I then jerked my head back to the warriors den as I heard movement come from that direction. And I was nearly startled as a figure crawled out from its entrance just a heartbeat later.

Snowstorm was making her way out into the open. Her eyes flashed with surprise for a moment, but quickly washed over with concern as she stared back at me. "Hey," she whispered, running up to meet me. "Can't sleep?"

"Nope," I replied, shaking my head. "Not at all."

Snowstorm let out a huff and settled down next to me. "Me neither," she sighed. "All of the sudden my nest feels like it's made of thorns."

I managed a small purr of amusement. "Oh, yeah?"

"These past couple of days, everything that's happened..." my friend went on, her head shaking slowly. "It's all left me completely wide awake."

I nodded in understanding, easily being able to sense Snowstorm's distress. *And why she might be a bit distressed...* "I can imagine," I murmured to her, casting her sidelong glances. "Going to the Twolegplace to rescue Lilypetal, Firestar's announcement, all of today's training, *other* things..."

I then gave Snowstorm a light nudge on her shoulder. "You're surely feeling pretty alert right now."

Snowstorm nodded, her eyes widen as she sighed. "That's for sure."

She then flashed me a look of confusion. "But... other things?" she repeated, tilting her head to the side. "What other things?"

I shrugged, pretending to ponder Snowstorm's question, when in actuality, I knew *exactly* what I was trying to say, and I figured that it wouldn't be long before she'd catch on to it. "I don't know... discoveries, maybe?" I muttered, letting my eyes flit around aimlessly. "Revelations that you've maybe had recently?"

I then looked back to Snowstorm to see that, sure enough, she seemed to be understanding my cryptic words. Her blue eyes widened as I leaned my head towards her and put my muzzle up to her ear. "You're welcome, by the way," I whispered.

I pulled away to see that my friend was rolling her eyes. "Oh, please," she sighed, flicking my ear with her tail. "Well... you wise cat, you," she then meowed. "You knew exactly what Goldenshine would say to me if I went to talk to her, didn't you?"

I gave Snowstorm another shrug, my gaze teasing. "There's a slim chance."

"Huh... well..." she then murmured, her eyes now staring straight ahead. She then let out another long sigh and began to shake her head. "Great StarClan, I've hardly had the chance to process it all - all of this... *Snowflight* stuff. And with the Dark Forest battle creeping up on us like this, I wonder if I ever will get to?"

I furrowed my eyebrows back at Snowstorm. "What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, things will surely be utter chaos up until they actually... *arrive*," Snowstorm explained. She then looked back at me, her blue eyes a mix of anxiety and confusion. "And we have no idea when that will be, do we?"

"I suppose not, but..." I began to reply, suddenly having to push down my own anxiety. *Who's to say that they won't show up tomorrow? Would we be prepared for that?*

I then worriedly glanced back at Snowstorm. *Would she be ready for that?* "...has it at least occurred to you yet that..."

Snowstorm stared back at me inquiringly, her tail swishing back and forth against the ground. "That what?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my spot as I tried to find my words. "That... I don't know..." I muttered nervously. "You may need to process things *come* the battle?"

Snowstorm didn't seem nearly as daunted by the question as I thought she'd be. In fact, she seemed to look less fearful now. "Yes, it has occurred to me."

My eyes widened with that answer. "It has?"

"Of course it has, Swiftflight," Snowstorm sighed, her voice revealing a bit of distress as she turned to completely face me. "Every word that Goldenshine spoke to me is engrained in my mind. I know what this battle is going to bring, and how it could possibly have to do with me."

The white she-cat then sat back down, letting her eyes trail towards the ground. "But... it's scary to think about sometimes."

Sometimes? Great StarClan, the fact that you're not constantly scared absolutely blows my mind... I thought, absolutely amazed by how well Snowstorm seemed to be taking all of this. *Having to fulfill another cat's destiny... that's so much to carry on a single cat's shoulders, yet Snowstorm takes it on with such grace and bravery.*

I shifted myself slightly, and let the tip of my tail rest on Snowstorm's shoulder. "I'm sure that it is," I meowed, then flashing her a reassuring look, already being certain of my next words. "But hey, whatever is going to happen, I know that you're going to handle it like a champ. Just like you did back in the Dark Forest."

I was relieved to then see Snowstorm let out a quiet *mrrow* of laughter and give me a grateful look. "Heh, that is pretty reassuring, actually," she purred to me. "Had I not done as well as I did, you probably wouldn't be sitting here next to me, actually giving me some really, really supportive words."

I simply gave a weak shrug in response to the praise. "Ah, well..."

I then looked back at Snowstorm to find that her blue eyes were wide with concern. "Hey, what's the matter?"

I was immensely confused by the question. "Huh?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes... why?"

Snowstorm then looked away from me, shrugging. "I don't know, you just seem... *sad*, or something," she replied before letting out a snort. "I mean, any negative emotion is pretty valid for any cat right now, but I know that you're more stoic than most."

She then tried to meet my gaze again. "So... it's definitely strange seeing you like this."

I didn't let her, hissing as I whipped my head around. "Like what? I'm fine! As fine as I can be," I meowed tautly, frustrated that Snowstorm seemed to be able to see right through me. "I mean, I revealed that I used to train in the Dark Forest, and my Clanmates are accepting me. I'm getting to train them, for StarClan's sake!"

I then looked back at Snowstorm, giving her the most stern gaze I could manage. "I have nothing to be sad about," I then hissed, hoping that my sharp voice would mask my large lie. *Because it is most definitely a lie, but Snowstorm won't know that. No one will.*

But, as I had feared, Snowstorm didn't let up. "I guess not..." she mused, tilting her head. "But you still seem off."

I then watched as my friend's eyes seemed to flash with understanding, as if she had come to a realization. I nearly wanted to roll my eyes and sigh as she then took a glance at the apprentices den, and then looked back at me. "Hey..." she then whispered, her gaze full of empathy. "You're upset about Cherrypaw, aren't you?"

I felt my fur beginning to bristle up defensively. "Who said that? Literally no one said that."

"It doesn't even need to be said, Swiftflight," Snowstorm murmured, her eyes narrowing. "I can tell."

"Tell *what*, Snowstorm?"

"That this whole situation with her is upsetting you more than you're letting yourself show."

"Foxdung to that."

"Foxdung to *that!*" Snowstorm insisted, standing up. "Swiftflight, I see the way you look at her."

I let my unsheathed claws sink into the ground, using it as a way to cope with my irritation and conflicted feelings. "At who?" I demanded. "Cherrypaw?"

"No!" Snowstorm insisted, to my surprise. "Well, yes, that too, but I meant Poppyfrost."

"Poppyfrost-"

"Cats who aren't aware of what she's doing to you and Cherrypaw wouldn't be able to tell, but I can so clearly see that resentful, angry look in your eye whenever she's around," Snowstorm went on,

barely letting me get a word out. Her eyes then briefly flashed with mischief as she took a step closer to me. Her demeanor was almost *challenging*. "You *hate it* that she's keeping you from Cherrypaw."

After a few heartbeats of Snowstorm simply staring back at me, I shut my eyes and let out a huff. "I do..." I conceded, not wanting to lie to the she-cat. *I really, really hate it. I'm not too sure why I hate it so much, but I do.*

I almost immediately regretted my words when Snowstorm gasped, her eyes glowing with triumph. "Ah-ha!"

"Shut up," I muttered.

Snowstorm the excitedly trotted up to me. "Oh, I'm far from shutting up," she meowed as she sat down once again. I then watched, my tail twitching impatiently as she seemed to take a moment to think. "As much as you may not want to hear it," she murmured after a few heartbeats, "I'm honestly not surprised at all that Poppyfrost is doing this."

"No, that's great. That's *exactly* what I wanted to hear," I hissed through gritted teeth.

Snowstorm ignored my sarcastic remark. "Even though I wasn't born to her, Poppyfrost was the queen that raised me once I was brought here."

"My apologies."

The white she-cat let out an annoyed, amused huff, nudging me on the shoulder. "Maybe hold back your bitterness for just a moment and let me talk?" she purred. Once I had reluctantly agreed to her request with a single nod and an eye roll, she continued. "She truly was a great mother, Swiftflight - kind, gentle, and fiercely protective of all three of us. She'd keep her kits from anything that she thought would hurt them, in whatever way she had to do it."

I then nearly rolled my eyes a second time as I noticed Snowstorm's eyes begin to gleam with admiration and affection for her foster mother. "It wouldn't matter what had to happen along the way as

long as her kits were safe," she went on. She then nodded to me, her eyes a bit wary. "She's seen how you used to be, Swiftflight, and she doesn't want to take any chances of you possibly bringing harm to her daughter."

With those words, I stood up, suddenly felt a strong surge of frustration and rage. "But she's as blind as Jayfeather if she thinks that I would!" I hissed, nearly forgetting that many cats were sleeping just tail-lengths away. "In fact, she's *delusional* if she thinks that I'm still like that. I would never, ever hurt Cherrypaw. I don't think I could have brought myself to be even slightly rude to her even when I was training in the Dark Forest. But now, it's *especially* true!"

I then forced myself to take a deep breath and sit back down, surprised by the passion of my words, and the fact that I had spoken them aloud. "I want to... spend time with Cherrypaw because she makes me happy, not to take advantage of her or hurt her in any way, Great *StarClan!*"

Snowstorm had simply watched intently as I had spoken, a glint of amusement in her blue eyes. "Hm. Have you ever tried saying all of this to Poppyfrost?" she asked me after a moment. "Hopefully more kindly?"

I felt my heart sink with that question, my mind immediately going back to just a night ago. I could so easily picture Poppyfrost's dark, condescending gaze and Cherrypaw's hurt one all over again. "Well..." was all I could force out.

Snowstorm leaned her head to the side and raised a single eyebrow. "Swiftflight..." she prompted.

I let out a sigh, giving in after a bit more hesitation. "Well..." I repeated. "*Tried* is definitely the operative word."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Great StarClan, it was as if I'd forgotten how to speak," I explained to Snowstorm, shaking my head in amazement. "And when I could speak, I... suddenly *felt* like I couldn't, if that makes sense."

Snowstorm slowly began to nod her head, her gaze thoughtful. "I see..." she murmured.

"Then Cherrypaw told me that I should try again, and... I just froze," I went on, having to push down my guilt and sorrow. "She told me that Poppyfrost might listen if I talk to her, that we might be able to spend time together again, that... she had feelings for me..."

As I expected, Snowstorm seemed to perk up at those words - her prediction she had made many moons ago having been proven right. "...but I had no idea what to say," I continued after a moment, my voice actually rising with distress. "She just stared back at me, looking so hurt when I didn't say a word back."

"And hence the reason that you both left the back of the warriors den looking so upset, huh?"

"Yes..." I answered Snowstorm, recalling just then the concerned and contemplative look she'd given me as I'd followed Cherrypaw out into the clearing. "I wanted to tell her that I want to be... spend time with her as much as she did me, but..."

I then let out a hiss of frustration. "I just... *couldn't.* I couldn't say what I needed to say. I didn't know how to."

"...Are you sure?"

I shot my gaze back to Snowstorm, my eyes narrowing. "Am I *sure?*" I repeated, again confused by one of her questions.

"Are you sure that you didn't know how to say what you wanted to say?" Snowstorm explaining, twitching her tail up as if to prompt me to answer.

I continued to be completely baffled. "Isn't that what I just said?"

Snowstorm then sighed, her initially testing gaze now a bit softer and sympathetic. "Sure, but... I've seen you lately, Swiftflight," she meowed. "So many times you've been able to speak up for yourself, to Ashfur, to and for ThunderClan, and prove that you are a cat worth trusting."

I flicked my ears, quickly realizing how true my friend's words were. *She is very much correct,* I told myself. *I've luckily had the courage to speak up for myself in so many instances, yet...*

I then pushed away my thoughts so that I could answer Snowstorm. "You're right, and it's come more easily to me than I ever could have hoped," I told the white she-cat.

I then took another moment to think before speaking again. "And, I mean... I want to stand up to Poppyfrost too. I really, really do," I continued. "But... it just feels... *harder.*"

"Really?" Snowstorm asked. "What's harder?"

I took yet another moment to think. "Well... this isn't a matter of defending myself or my Clan, or proving that I even want to defend my Clan in the first place," I continued, simply giving Snowstorm all of my thoughts out loud. "This is... different. And because it's different, it feels harder. And much scarier. I-I... I..."

I then trailed off, proceeding to let out a small hiss of impatience at myself. "Look, this is all hard for me to articulate, okay?" I muttered, shifting my paws back and forth. "I'm not used to having to use solely my feelings to get what I want. I was always taught that feelings were just a burden; a nuisance."

I looked back at Snowstorm as I heard her let out a snort. She seemed to have come to some sort of realization all over again by the gleam in her eye, and the way that she slowly nodded her head. "It sounds like that mindset is the real burden in this situation, Swiftflight."

I flicked my ears and twitched my whiskers with intrigue. "What do you mean?"

"Well, this idea that having feelings and wanting to act on them is weak," Snowstorm explained. "You can't help it, but that mindset is still there, Swiftflight. That's why you are in this rut with Cherrypaw and Poppyfrost at all."

She then let out a sigh, her eyes now full of sympathy. "Look, I see

how upset you are with the situation right now, it's obvious," she went on. "I don't know if I've ever seen you look so down since you've left the Dark Forest - not just tonight, but since Poppyfrost first forced you and Cherrypaw apart."

I then felt Snowstorm give me another light nudge. "If you want to feel better, you're going to have to fully push away this horrible thing that Ashfur put into your head," she softly insisted to me. "Because while you've proven that you are a Clan cat worthy of trust in many ways now, believe it or not, there's more to this life than just being the best warrior that you can be."

I slowly forced myself to look back at Snowstorm, entranced by her words at this point. "Along with that, you are also a cat, too," she then meowed, her gaze bright and encouraging. "You can look out for yourself. You're allowed to act on your feelings, my friend."

Snowstorm then wrapped her tail around my shoulders as she let out a sigh. "I agree, it probably seems really, really scary. But..."

She then lifted her tail so that she could flick one of my ears. "But surely it wouldn't make you so nervous if it wasn't something... or someone, that you cared about so much?"

After my friend finished off her words, I could tell that she was staring intently back at me, waiting for some sort of reply, but I certainly wasn't going to be able to give her one for the moment. I had already broken my gaze from the she-cat's once again, and was staring ahead as I plummeted into my own thoughts.

Snowstorm seemed to quickly notice this, purring with amusement and giving a single nod before beginning to back away. "Alright, well... I think I may have another go at trying to sleep," she breathed just before turning around and padding towards the den entrance. "I'll see you tomorrow, Swiftflight."

I continued to try and gather my thoughts as the white she-cat then vanished back into the warriors den. I mean, I was blown away by everything that my friend had just said.

But she was completely right. Completely right in every single thing

she had said. *Everything.*

I let out a sigh as I eventually forced myself to stand up and shake out my fur. *Ashfur's influence has stuck with me more than I could have ever thought possible, hasn't it?* I thought to myself, completely astonished by how blind I'd been to my own thoughts and tendencies. *I really have been just focused on my image and gaining my Clanmate's trust. There's nothing wrong with that, but that's not all there is to being a warrior, is it?*

I then turned around, deciding that I would also have a go at trying to fall asleep in my nest. And, for the first time in a while, I felt at ease. Snowstorm is right, I repeated to myself as I lied down in my moss bed. *I'm allowed to be a cat, too.*

I then felt my stomach twist up into a knot and fill with butterflies as I lowered my head. *And I will let myself be just that,* I told myself. *It will be scary, and hard... but I'm going to try. Soon.*

Chapter 28

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

Come on, Goldenshine, I told myself as I loosely shook my head back and forth for the hundredth time. *Great StarClan, you'd think it would be a bit easier for a cat to prevent themselves from collapsing to the ground out of exhaustion.*

I then let out a huff of frustration as I turned to face Hazeltail and Mousewhisker once again, who I was currently training with, telling myself that I really needed to give them my full attention despite my grogginess that didn't seem as if it could wash away in even the harshest storm.

I knew very well that this was the worst possible time to be tired, and I had been trying my hardest to focus despite the lack of sleep I'd gotten last night. I'd estimate, or at least it felt like, I'd gotten just a few blinks of sleep at the most.

Whatever I'd gotten, it felt as if I hadn't slept at all, and it now left me to face another day of training with a dull head and eyelids that seemed to weigh double as much.

But I'd been much too preoccupied with my thoughts to even think about sleeping - thoughts of the Dark Forest's arrival, of Snowstorm's destiny, of Lilypetal and this plan that she insisted that she carry out on her own...

At the moment, it seemed impossible to live in a world with absolutely no worries. I really hoped that it wasn't showing, but mine were practically consuming me.

Another reason why I was trying to focus on the present moment. All of that wasn't to prevent me from paying attention and putting forth my best effort. But I will admit, the fact that Mousewhisker seemed bit restless as well made me feel a bit better.

I had been assigned to train with the two littermates just a bit before dusk, and it appeared as if I was about to practice a battle move with Hazeltail at her prompting, while Mousewhisker watched and gave tips if needed.

I let the gray-and-white she-cat leap at me first. And once she made her leap, forelegs outstretched, I was already ready to dodge my Clanmate's advances.

And just as I began to skid to my side, I was surprised to hear that Mousewhisker already seemed to be shouting something out to me. "Goldenshine, watch out!" he exclaimed, his voice urgent. "You're about to step on a-"

At that very moment, I felt one of my back paws meet something painfully pointy.

Mousewhisker sighed and slowly closed his eyes. "Thorn..." he finished.

It didn't take long for the pain to feel as if it was running throughout my entire back leg, and I couldn't suppress an uncomfortable hiss as I pulled it away from the spot. "What in the name of StarClan?" I growled, trying to look back at my punctured paw. "When did that get there?"

I looked up for just a brief moment to see Hazeltail padding up to me, her green eyes concerned, and a bit amused. "Well, it's *been* there," she murmured. I had to suppress another hiss as I realized she almost sounded condescending. "I thought you'd seen it already."

"No, I didn't," I muttered, rolling my eyes. *Definitely could be explained by my lack of sleep, however...*

I then finally forced myself to attempt to set my paw down, but it had barely touched the ground before I felt another unbearable shooting pain. "*Geez*, that hurts!" I meowed, my voice tight with agony.

I then noticed Mousewhisker quickly running up to sniff at my paw.

"But it's barely touched the ground yet!" he pointed out worriedly. "Should you maybe go to Jayfeather?"

I managed to tense up even more hearing the medicine cat's name. "Jayfeather?" I muttered anxiously.

Mousewhisker's green eyes still glowed with concern, but it was clear that he was very amused by my question. "Yes, Goldenshine," he purred. "Our medicine cat?"

I slowly nodded back at the tom, my stomach slowly beginning to ache and grow heavy with my nerves. "Right..." I murmured, trying to think of any possible way I could avoid having to interact with the gray tabby tom. "But... neither of you can pull it out?"

I glanced back towards Hazeltail to see her giving a shrug, and her eyes then narrowed as she began to observe my paw as her brother had. "Well... I'd maybe have a go at it, but I don't think I trust myself, especially when it's bothering you this much," she meowed, to my dismay. She then let out a snort and backed away a pawstep. "But I'm sure that Jayfeather will have the perfect remedy, and now that he's cleared his name, he's probably eager to heal *any* cat at this point!"

I let out a sigh at the she-cat's words, realizing that I was going to have to give in. *I suppose I'd rather risk another awkward encounter with Jayfeather than this pad getting infected.* "Alright," I meowed to my Clanmates before beginning to reluctantly limp towards the medicine den. "I'll be back soon." *Hopefully as soon as possible.*

I then couldn't suppress yet another hiss as the familiar clearing came into sight. *Gosh darn you, you thorn, digging as deep into my pad as you did...*

As low-key and calm as a visit to the medicine den should be, I could already be certain that I'd leave feeling confused and ruffled just as I had been every time I spoke with Jayfeather.

And the gray tabby tom now had his position as a medicine cat back, as Hazeltail had mentioned. And as happy as I was that Jayfeather was getting to do what he did best once again, I couldn't

help but think that this encounter as was about to have with him could have been avoided had he still been suspended from his duties.

But I knew that if I wanted to return to training as soon as possible, I'd have to buck up and deal with him for a few moments and simply be prepared if he chose to scold me about the Snowstorm situation again.

I actually found myself feeling a twinge of sorrow as I arrived at the medicine den's entrance, and I actually had to take a moment before deciding to go in. *I used to burst into this den and speak to Jayfeather, not caring what he was doing. He always seemed so annoyed, and yet he always listened to me, and he never told me to leave...* I thought sadly. *But now I'm terrified to do something as little as make my presence known.*

I then let out a sigh as I finally crawled through the bramble screen. *Oh, how things have changed.*

My dejection was then replaced with nerves all over again once my eyes fell on the medicine cat, who was at the back of the den with his herb stores as he usually was. He immediately knew that I was there, turning his head slightly over his shoulder and giving a single flick of his ears.

I found myself taking a pawstep back. "Um... hey, there," I murmured, feeling as if I needed to fill up the silence.

And I simply watched nervously as Jayfeather then lifted his muzzle slightly, as if he were sniffing something in the air. And after a moment, he let out a small grunt and fully turned to face me, his blind blue eyes narrowed. "I smell blood."

I gave the medicine cat a shrug, even though he couldn't see it, and gently lifted up my injured back paw. "Well... a thorn puncturing a paw will sometimes make blood appear."

I was then surprised to see Jayfeather snort, his head tilting to the side. "You have a thorn in your paw?" he asked in confusion and disbelief. "How in the name of StarClan did that happen?"

I slowly opened my mouth, shaking my head slowly as I tried to figure out how to answer that question. "I... stepped on it."

"And you didn't see it?" Jayfeather then hissed with annoyance. "A thorn in the stone hollow?"

"I wasn't paying attention!"

The gray tabby tom then rolled his eyes, letting out a huff. "Great StarClan," he muttered as he padded up to me, his head shaking slowly. He then paused once he was about a tail-length from my flank.

For a moment, the two of us stood in silence, and it took me a few heartbeats to realize that Jayfeather was probably expecting me to lift my paw so that he could observe it.

I let out a quiet gasp. "Oh, sorry," I whispered, quickly lifting my paw for the medicine cat to see, and simultaneously trying to push down my embarrassment. *If anyone is making this awkward, it's me!*

Jayfeather didn't reply, and simply let out a quiet hiss as I felt his nose begin to rub against my pad. After a moment, he pulled away, and just as I was expecting him to walk in front of me to grab whatever herbs he needed, I felt a strong jolt of pain in the very spot that the medicine cat had been sniffing.

I hissed with pain yet again, wincing and screwing my eyes shut. "Ouch!" I growled, my teeth clenched together. "What did you just do?"

I turned back to Jayfeather to see him lowering his head, placing a small object onto the ground. "I pulled out the thorn."

"Did you ever think to give me a warning?"

Jayfeather sniffed as he pushed the thorn aside with a paw. "What, like counting to three? Please." He then began to make his way back towards his herb stores. "Stay there. I'm getting cobwebs."

I sniffed as well, my discomfort slowing ebbing away without me even directly realizing it. I felt like I could speak to the medicine cat

as I always had, before our quarrel had arisen. "Thanks for telling me, because I was most definitely going to leave the den with blood trickling out of my paw," I murmured sarcastically.

Just as quickly as he had left, Jayfeather returned to my side with the cobwebs in his jaws. He used one of his paws to prompt me to lift up mine, and he gently began to dab at the spot where the thorn had been. "Well..." he muttered in response to my words. "You've done something similar before."

I couldn't help but let out a huff and roll my eyes as Jayfeather reminded me of that incident. "That was one time!" I insisted, my voice full of laughter. "I was playing with Swiftflight when he was a kit, and a branch on that fallen tree left a small gash on my flank. I didn't want to be away in the medicine den for very long, or he'd start to worry about his mother!"

"Yes, because Swiftflight seeing his mother's flank still gushing with blood would have been much more reassuring," Jayfeather muttered. And as I rolled my eyes again, he backed away and headed for his herb store once more. And I felt a small jab of concern as I heard him let out a hiss.

Making sure not to put much weight on my paw for the moment, I carefully turned to look back at the medicine cat. "What's wrong?"

Jayfeather lowered his head for a moment before turning back around to reveal the herbs in his mouth. "We're nearly out of marigold. This is the last of it," he answered me through his full mouth. He then quickly made the petals into a poultice and began to spread it over my paw. "I'll need to go out and collect much, much more."

He then let out a long sigh, and he closed his blind eyes. "As soon as possible."

I immediately felt a stab of sympathy as I stared back at Jayfeather. *Even if this destiny ahead of him didn't exist, a medicine cat preparing for a battle as big as this one must be incredibly stressful, almost even more so than for the cats actually fighting,* I realized. *In a way,* he's *the one making sure that every cat comes back out of this alive.*

I felt the impulse to do something, and after we'd just had a conversation that made it seem as if everything was okay between us, I felt comfortable doing so. "...Do you need help?"

Jayfeather genuinely seemed thrown off by the question. His whiskers twitched, and he met my gaze as if he weren't blind at all. "Help?" he repeated, his eyes beginning to narrow.

I anxiously gave the tabby tom a nod, suddenly worrying if I'd been wrong to make the polite gesture. "Collecting herbs, I mean," I replied, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

And I continued to worry that I had said that wrong thing as Jayfeather simply stared back at me for what felt like an eternity of time. *Probably thinking up clever and snarky ways to tell me that it's not gonna happen...*

But to my surprise, after a bit, the medicine cat sighed, gave me a single nod. "Sure," he finally answered me before proceeding to swiftly pad out of the den. "That's fine."

For a moment, I simply watched the medicine cat go, frozen with utter bewilderment at how easy that had been. "Oh, now?" I then called out to him. And when I didn't hear a reply, I quickly scrambled to my paws to follow Jayfeather out. "Okay - we're going now!"

Jayfeather was already at the camp's entrance by the time I slid through the bramble screen, and I quickened my pace in order to catch up with him. And just within a couple of heartbeats, I was crawling through the gorse tunnel just behind him.

And once we were out of the forest, I padded up to walk side by side with him. To my surprise, he didn't quicken his pace. *Is he actually making as much effort to make things seem better between us as I am?* I wondered hopefully, curious as to whether things had felt as normal to him back in the medicine den as it had with me. I then felt a small pang of fear. *Or is he just as angry as he was before? Maybe that's what all of his snide remarks earlier really were. It's always so hard to tell with him.*

I decided to test the waters by breaking the silence that had taken over once again. I began to scan my eyes around the forest as I murmured, "So, where does one typically find marigold?"

I looked back at Jayfeather to find him sniffing the air, his mouth gaped open. "It usually grows closer to the water, so we're heading towards the lake."

The medicine cat then quickened his pace, as if he were in a hurry. "And with greenleaf approaching, there'll hopefully be plenty of it."

And sure enough, just as the lake came into sight, I instantly recognized the yellow flowers lined around the trees that hovered over the body of water. They were scattered all over the place, and I truly don't think I'd ever seen so much yellow.

I actually let out a purr of amusement and gave Jayfeather a light nudge. "Would you consider that plenty?"

I watched as Jayfeather padded forward and begin to sniff out the area. "More than plenty," he replied after a few heartbeats. He then began to snap off the stems with his claws, and he beckoned me over with a lash of his tail. "Come on, collect as much as you can."

I gave the medicine cat an eager nod and quickly ran up to join him, excited to have yet another task that might wake me up just a bit.

And I'd only picked off a few of the flowers when Jayfeather spoke again. Or, rather, it looked as if he wanted to speak, but he was greatly hesitating. And by the time he actually spoke, I was overwhelmed by my own curiosity. "So, how is Snowstorm doing?" he asked, keeping his blind gaze on the flowers below him.

I raised my eyebrows and tilted my head to the side, completely surprised that the tom was the one initiating a conversation about Snowstorm - something that had caused him to grow angry quite quickly now when we talked about it. "Snowstorm?" was all I could force out initially.

But after I took a moment for the shock to blow over, I truthfully

answered Jayfeather, knowing that I had no reason to deprive him of the real answer. "Well... I can tell that things are beginning to set in for her... the fact that this battle might... have something to do with her," I began apprehensively.

I then internally reassured myself, and I let my head lift just a bit. "But it only seems to be driving her to work harder," I went on more proudly. "I spent most of today training her with Swiftflight, and I made sure that he taught her the most clever, handy moves that he knew from the Dark Forest."

I then let out a sigh as I began to shake my head in amazement. "She... she didn't miss a beat," I nearly whispered. "She's doing a fantastic job." *And although I wouldn't expect anything less...*

I then closed my eyes as worry threatened to rise up inside of me once again, thinking of all of the possibilities for Snowstorm that could come with this battle. "I shouldn't be worried about her," I then admitted to Jayfeather, "but I still am... you know?"

Jayfeather continued to surprise me as he also let out a sigh. "I definitely see what you mean," the medicine cat replied calmly, his eyes deep and solemn. "You trust that she can handle it, yet it's hard to let her go free and let her do it all on her own, isn't it?"

I widened my eyes, amazed by how well Jayfeather seemed to understand what I was feeling. "That's exactly it! How did you know?" I asked him eagerly. A chill then ran down my spine as I pressed to him more quietly, "Is... is that something that you can sense?" *I sometimes forget that he can see into cats' minds. I wonder if I'll ever get over how creepy that is.*

Jayfeather didn't directly answer my question. "You... you've been..." he stammered instead, seeming to use the marigold collecting as a way to mask his discomfort. "You seem to have done a great job with Snowstorm... doing it all on your own."

I was thankful that Jayfeather couldn't see my mouth dropping. *Did Jayfeather just...* compliment *me?* I wondered in astonishment. *And did he just compliment me for something that he's been so bitter about?*

I shook my head slowly. For some reason, I felt like I'd still touch a nerve with whatever I said. "Really? Well, I certainly tried..." I meowed hesitantly. I then nervously began to pick at the marigold stems more quickly. "And... well, I wanted it to all feel worth it, considering you weren't there to help me anymore."

My heart nearly skipped a beat as Jayfeather broke a marigold flower from its stem quite sharply. "That was your choice, Goldenshine," he coldly reminded me.

I pushed down all of my original reluctance to answer the tom. "A choice that I knew that I had to make, Jayfeather. As I've tried to tell you before, it wasn't a selfish decision, as much as it probably seemed like it was," I insisted to him. "I was absolutely terrified to approach you and tell you that I was going to do it all without you, and going through with it was even more so."

Jayfeather seemed to intently listening to my words, his blind blue eyes dark. "If you were so scared, then why did you do it at all?"

"Because I was thinking of you!" I replied to the medicine cat, almost exasperated that he didn't understand that. I then threw down the marigold I'd been holding in one of my paws and took a step closer to him. "Jayfeather, you didn't even have to say anything; I could tell before I even found out about your destiny that you were carrying so much on your shoulders. I truly thought that I was making things easier for you."

When Jayfeather didn't reply, simply giving me the same dark, thoughtful stare, I decided to push further. "I mean, that's what friends do, right?" I went on more softly, letting the tip of my tail touch his shoulder for just a moment. "They look out for each other."

I then sighed with dismay when Jayfeather continued to stand in silence, and I figured I'd just imagined the slight gleam in his eyes. "I was just trying to-"

I then cut myself off, stunned as I saw Jayfeather raise his tail. "Look, Goldenshine," he murmured after a heartbeat, "you don't need to waste your breath trying to explain yourself again."

I flicked my ears with surprise and intrigue. "I don't?"

Jayfeather closed his eyes. "No."

"Why?"

After another few heartbeats of me waiting in extreme anticipation, the medicine cat let out a sigh and put down his marigold collection. "Let's just say that, out of the two of us, one of us has been a complete mouse-brain in this entire situation."

He then hesitated before speaking his next words. "...and it's not you."

My eyes slowly widened back at the gray tabby tom. "...Really?" *I can hardly believe what I'm hearing...*

"Yes," Jayfeather replied, already seeming more confident of his words, but his eyes glittered with the smallest bit of guilt. "I'd like to think that it's typical for a cat to feel... hurt when they feel that they're... not needed by someone else anymore. And it's typical for a cat like *me* to act like said complete mouse-brain when they are hurt."

I was overwhelmed with so much guilt, sympathy, and shock at the same time as I continued to listen to Jayfeather speak. "Yes, the fact that I wasn't apart of what could release Snowflight and help her return to StarClan was painful enough, but there were also..." He then began to shift his paws back and forth. "...other reasons."

All of that guilt, sympathy, and shock I had been feeling was quickly replaced with extreme affection as I finally understood the meaning behind the medicine cat's recent behavior. *That furball...* I thought warmly. *You really can never tell what he is thinking, can you?*

Having to suppress a purr of amusement, I picked up one of the marigold flowers with my tail and began to tickle Jayfeather's cheek with it. "Other reasons?" I teased to him as I continued to purr. "Other reasons, Jayfeather?"

I finally let a *mrrow* of laughter erupt from my jaws as Jayfeather

began to bat the flower away. "I just said so!" he hissed. "And if you make me repeat anything that I just said, I'm probably going to vomit all over the marigold, and it'll be useless."

I let out another purr of amusement and pulled the marigold away, adding it to my pile. "Hm, then I will once again be a *fantastic* friend to you, and spare you the trouble," I murmured.

And with those words, my shocked-level topped all previous ones when I thought that I actually saw a flash of *warmth* cross through Jayfeather's blue eyes, and his initially tense demeanor actually seemed to relax.

And in that moment, I knew our friendship had been restored.

I flashed the tom an affectionate look, then letting out a content huff as I scanned over our herb collection. "Okay, so, do you think that we have enough marigold to bring back to camp?"

Jayfeather bent down to sniff at my pile. "Wow, you actually managed to collect a good amount," he muttered after a grunt. I rolled my eyes as he then turned around and began to gather up his collection. "Okay, then. We can probably-"

My ears pricked up in alarm as Jayfeather's words were interrupted by a rustle up ahead, that was followed by pawsteps. *A single cat's pawsteps,* I realized anxiously, recalling Thornclaw's words from yesterday. *A cat wandering on their own right now would probably seem very strange.*

I leaped in front of Jayfeather, feeling my fur beginning to bristle. "Who's there?"

To my complete surprise, it was actually Thornclaw himself that came into view just a couple of heartbeats later. His pale blue eyes seemed to flash with relief as his gaze fell on me. "Goldenshine!" he breathed, running up to meet me. "There you are! That didn't take nearly as long as I had worried it would."

I leaned my head forward to touch noses with my father, a purr rumbling in my throat. "What did?"

Thornclaw pulled away, revealing his relieved blue eyes once again. "Looking for you!" he explained. "Brambleclaw had asked me to check up on all of the training groups, and when I got to Mousewhisker and Hazeltail, they said that you were supposed to be with them, but they thought they'd seen you leave camp a while ago, despite you saying that you'd be back 'soon'."

My father then gave a brief nod to Jayfeather, but kept his gaze on me. "I wanted to check and make sure that you were alright, but it seems that you're in the most capable paws that you could be in."

I gave Jayfeather a quick flick on the ear with my tail. "Eh, I suppose," I murmured teasingly.

Then, I let out a gasp of panic as I further processed Thornclaw's words. "Oh, no! I'd completely forgotten about Mousewhisker and Hazeltail, I've probably kept them waiting for so long!" I exclaimed with dismay.

I then urgently picked up my marigold, prepared to pelt back to camp as quickly as I could. "I've got to-"

But Thornclaw quickly cut me off, raising his tail in front of me as he let out a chuckle. "And they will be fine waiting a bit longer - I told them to join Bumblestripe, Dovewing and Blossomfall," he briskly explained.

He then lowered his tail, tilting his head as he gave me an affectionate, inquiring look. "I was actually hoping for maybe a more thorough check-in?"

I immediately felt overcome with warmth at my father's words. And actually, I didn't realize just how much I'd like to talk with my father until he'd directly proposed it, but the thought filled me with so much relief and comfort. "Yeah, that's fine!" I replied to Thornclaw.

I then hesitantly turned back to Jayfeather, trying to hold back a purr. "Um... do you mind bringing my collection of marigold back to camp along with yours?" I asked the medicine cat in an annoyingly kind voice.

As I expected, the gray tabby tom didn't take my words particularly well. "And she suddenly forgets the reason that I brought assistance in the first place!" he breathed, raising his head to the sky as if he were complaining to StarClan.

I slowly began to shove my pile of flowers towards Jayfeather's. "Hey, that was to collect marigold more quickly," I reminded him teasingly. "You're used to doing this on your own anyways, right?"

I then watched, still having to hold back a purr as Jayfeather rolled his eyes, flashed me an annoyed look, and finally reached forward to grab my bunch. He then picked it all up in his jaws and turned to head in the direction of camp. "Truly the most thoughtless cat I've ever met..." I could hear him mutter.

I finally let the purr rise in my throat, now fully being able to comprehend the subtext behind any of my friend's words. "You're the best too, Jayfeather!" I called out to him.

I then turned back to Thornclaw, whose pale blue eyes were glowing with amusement. "Trust me, he's *so* happy that I'm in his life," I muttered to him.

Thornclaw purred with amusement and settled down beside me. "Oh, I have no doubt," my father meowed. "And anyways, you've given him so much help up until now, that it'd seem pretty strange for him to not feel any sort of appreciation for you."

"That's true, and I'm glad to help that cranky little furball," I replied, filling up with affection once again.

But it was quickly replaced with a bit of guilt, and I let my head lower just a bit. "But I still feel a bit bad for ditching Mousewhisker and Hazeltail..."

Thornclaw raised a single eyebrow, his gaze warm and teasing. "Even for a talk with your father?"

I furrowed both of my eyebrows and narrowed my eyes back at him as I pretended to hesitate. "Hm..." I mused for a moment, then shrugging. "I suppose not."

I then purred with amusement as Thornclaw nuzzled my head with his tail. "That's what I like to hear," he purred back. After a moment, his gaze then seemed to wash over with concern as he looked back at me. "So?"

I tilted my head to the side as I welled up with curiosity. "So?" I prompted my father.

Thornclaw then shrugged and let out a sigh. "Well, I just have been meaning to see how you're doing with... all of this," he elaborated solemnly. "I've seen you do nothing but train, work..." His eyes then seemed to glow with pride for just a heartbeat. "You've only been *doing* things; no talking."

I couldn't help but sniff at my father's words. "No talking?" I repeated to him. "But the whole point of our meeting yesterday was to talk!"

"Sure," Thornclaw agreed, shrugging again. He then shifted himself a bit closer to me and touched his nose to my ear. "Talking about the things you're training and working *for*, but even with all of that, I don't have any idea of how you're *feeling*."

As hesitant as I would typically be to share what was currently trapped in my own mind, my father's warm, genuinely concerned gaze made me instantly feel as if my words would be going to a safe place.

I let out a long sigh. "Well, I suppose I'm a bit hesitant to share how I'm feeling... because I'm scared. I'm really scared, Thornclaw," I began, looking up at him with wide eyes.

I suddenly found everything that I was feeling pouring out of me like a waterfall. "There's so much at stake here. I mean, so many things can go wrong!" I went on, repeating all of the thoughts that had prevented me from getting any sleep the previous night. "And it's all coming so quickly... *none* of us could have planned for this."

I then slowly shut my eyes. "I'm... I'm just... scared."

I then felt Thornclaw wrap his tail around my shoulders. "And you

have all the reason to be scared, Goldenshine," he responded to me softly. I then opened my eyes to find that his own gaze was now reflecting all of the fear that I felt. "I'm scared too," he nearly whispered, shutting his own eyes as if to shield any fear from entering his body. "I'm scared about... many things."

A chill ran down my spine, and my heart instantly began to beat faster as I realized what Thornclaw might be referring to - something that only the two of us and Swiftflight knew about. But not wanting to think about that, I was relieved when he spoke again. "I'm sure that every cat around this lake is scared for this battle, for their own reasons. And you're right - there's so much at stake," my father went on. "The Clans have never, ever faced a threat like this before."

I then turned to look at Thornclaw as he seemed to be giving me a reassuring look. "But we're training a preparing as much as we can, right?" he meowed calmly. "It's all that we can do."

As reassuring as Thornclaw's words should have been, I was practically blinded by the worry and panic that I'd felt for most of the day, and since Firestar had first announced what he'd heard of the Dark Forest. *I wonder if even moons of preparation could make us ready for this...*

I could feel Thornclaw's eyes still on me, and with his thoughtful gaze, I could tell that he knew that his words hadn't done the trick yet. So, I was intrigued when I saw his eyes flash with warmth and amusement. "You know something funny?" he murmured after a moment, looking off into the distance. "I seem to remember having a conversation so similar to this one some time ago."

I flicked my ears with interest. "Really?" I asked in awe. "With who?"

I was growing increasingly more confused the more that Thornclaw's eyes glowed with amusement. "You may know her," he answered me, his gaze continuing to glimmer. "This younger, determined, feisty golden brown tabby she-cat." He then gave me a light nudge, and gave me a wink. "I seriously feel very strongly that you might know her."

I continued to well up with warmth and humor myself as I finally realized what Thornclaw was getting at. *A truly fantastic, amazing cat, for sure! Thornclaw's right - I know her quite well!*

"She was once in a situation very similar to yours," Thornclaw went on. "She was very upset because her sister - you may know her too - wanted to take a path different from hers, and she didn't like that at all."

I then purred with amusement as Thornclaw looked back at me, his eyes wide with amazement. "It completely took her by surprise."

I continued to nod back in understanding. "Things weren't going as she had planned..." I murmured, trying to recall this very moment that my father was referring to.

"No, they weren't," Thornclaw replied, his gaze softening once again. "But you know what I told her?"

I was suddenly overwhelmed with such a strange feeling of warmth, nostalgia, and amazement at the same time as I clearly remembered the advice my father had given me all of those moons ago. "Sometimes things don't go as planned, but..." I recollected out loud. "A part of being a warrior is being strong through change." *Really, really great advice...*

"Exactly," Thornclaw answered, giving me a nod. I then watched as his eyes began to glow with pride all over again. "And I have to say - I think that this younger, determined, and feisty she-cat would be pretty happy to see how this older version of the same determined and feisty she-cat integrated this advice into her life beyond that."

"Really?" I questioned Thornclaw in astonishment. "You think so?"

Thornclaw looked full of certainty as he nodded back to me. "Absolutely," he replied before sniffing. "And to be honest, I'm surprised to hear that you're so scared, because you've done nothing by try to rise above the occasion since Firestar announced the Dark Forest's arrival - training with all of your might, watching over Snowstorm to make sure that she is ready, and even being so quick to set up the meeting with Lilypetal, Swiftflight and me. I've been so

proud to see it all."

I then clearly recognized the look in my father's eyes that I had questioned him about when I'd asked him about the family meeting just a couple of nights ago. "Very, very proud, and I know that Lilypetal is as well," he continued. "You know... I'd even go as far as to say that your actions are pretty... *heroic*."

My eyes had never stretched wider. "Heroic?"

"Yes, definitely," Thornclaw meowed, giving me a certain nod. "And you know what? Heroes can definitely be scared, but no less ready for what they have to face."

He then touched his muzzle to my cheek. "And I know that you're ready. You've more than proven that already," he murmured. He then pulled away to give me an inquiring, hopeful look. "And you know that I wouldn't tell you that if it wasn't true."

I took a deep breath, realizing that Thornclaw's words couldn't have been more reassuring and uplifting. *Being a hero. That's what Goldenpaw wanted more than anything - to prove that she could be a hero.*

I then lifted my chin higher, and let my chest puff out just a bit. *Goldenshine still wants that too,* I realized with pride. *And who's to say that I can't take advantage of this, in order to accomplish just that?*

I then finally looked back at Thornclaw so that I could respond to him. "No, you wouldn't," I whispered, digging my head into his neck fur. "Thank you, father. Thank you so much."

I felt my father rest his muzzle on my head. "It's always my pleasure," he purred.

I didn't pull away right away, and simply took comfort in my father's touch. *The most amazing father to ever exist,* I thought to myself. *His loyalty to me, or any of his kin could never be doubted. He's always here for us, and never thinks of himself.*

But I also felt just as comforted when I did eventually pull away, and I met his warm pale blue gaze. "Ready to return to camp?" I

asked, still a bit reluctant to return to the busy-ness and preparation taking place.

To my surprise, Thornclaw seemed just as reluctant. I watched as he let out a sigh and looked deeper out into the forest. "I'll be just a bit behind you," he murmured, his gaze darkening. "There's someone else I must check in with first."

Chapter 29

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

With the words I had just uttered, I truly don't think that I had ever seen two cats look so incredibly astonished at the same time. I was almost sure that Ashfur's deep blue eyes were going to topple onto the ground from how wide that they stretched.

"What did you just say?" he asked after several long moments of complete silence, his gray-speckled fur beginning to bristle.

I simply stood in my same place, holding my gaze on the Dark Forest warrior. "I said that it's a deal," I repeated calmly.

"You're joking."

I slowly shook my head back and forth, trying to hold my confidence in everything that I was saying. "No, I'm not at all."

"Foxdung to that!" Ashfur then hissed, throwing his head up in the air in anger. He then locked his blazing blue eyes with my own - hopefully unreadable - gaze. "Come on, Lilypetal, what are you playing at?"

I couldn't help but let out a snort. "What are *you* playing at, Ashfur?" I inquired to the tom, tilting my head to the side. "You seem incredibly shocked that I'm actually complying with your request."

I then forced myself to take a step forward. "Is there a reason why I should be unsure?"

I then watched as Ashfur flashed me a skeptical, suspicious look before slowly averting his gaze towards Tigerstar, who seemed to be trying to mask the fact that he felt the same as his fellow Dark Forest warrior did - dubious, and utterly surprised.

I then had to keep myself from flinching as Ashfur's head quickly snapped back in my direction. "Why are you doing this?" he demanded to me through gritted teeth.

I shrugged back at him. "You should very well know that answer, Ashfur," I sneered. "You said that you would stay away from my family if I agreed to help you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Tigerstar's amber eyes slowly narrowing down into slits. "But you had said-" the former ShadowClan leader began, surely about to turn my words around on me.

But I didn't let him. "I obviously needed some time to think about it, and I did," I explained, nodding to the dark tabby tom. "Seems like a pretty fair deal, if you ask me."

As I spoke, I felt my fur beginning to tingle as I realized that I was getting closer and closer to finally being able to do what I had wanted to get to the Dark Forest for in the first place. What I was finally getting the ability to do with the information I'd sought out for the past few moons.

I then took a deep breath before going on. "But that time to think also made me decide that I may want to... *adjust* the deal a bit."

I then turned back to Ashfur, giving a single lash of my tail and raising a single eyebrow. "Say I were to give you a bit of a new proposition?"

I felt another determined, hopeful rush as I noticed Ashfur's blue eyes briefly flash with intrigue. He exchanged yet another glance with Tigerstar before looking back at me, his gaze now full of wonder and interest, but still quite uncertain. "No tricks?" he murmured after a few heartbeats.

I tried to imagine all of the nerves and tension that I felt sinking into the ground as my claws dug into the muddy earth. "No tricks," I replied to Ashfur, my heart pounding as I shook my head back at him. *Well... I suppose it depends on what he means by "tricks"...*

I then beckoned him and Tigerstar closer with my tail - a gesture that I never, ever thought that I would do to any cat that could be considered an enemy. "Now listen," I began, trying to make my voice sound as assertive and self-assured as possible. "I still refuse to give you any information to use against the Clans..."

I then nodded specifically towards Ashfur, trying to hold back a smirk. "But I think you'll find that you'll be quite okay with that," I meowed to him. "I know that there's something else that you want, and I'll gladly help you to get it..."

~>~>~>~>~>~

...and I'll gladly help you to get it... I said in my own thoughts, reflecting on my encounter in the Dark Forest from the night before - a strange, satisfied yet apprehensive rush running through my tabby-and-white pelt each time I recalled it.

I then had to hold back a sneer as I padded swiftly through ThunderClan's camp, scanning my eyes around the clearing. *Oh, I can hardly wait to see the look on his face when he sees what "getting it" really is... oh, I hope that it all works...*

I then shook my head quickly, telling myself that I had to bring myself back to full focus, even with all of the feelings that last night's meeting stirred inside of me. *You've done all that you can do for the time being,* I reminded myself. *So now, focus on the parts that you can control.*

And at the moment, what I could control was fulfilling the job I'd just been given by Brambleclaw - patrolling the camp, and checking in on all of the training groups that had been made earlier in the day. I'd been training with Spiderleg, Mousefur and Purdy when the ThunderClan deputy had pulled me aside and given me the task.

It appeared as if Brambleclaw had chosen a couple of cats to do it, because it appeared that Thornclaw also seemed to be making the rounds - making his way around camp, and popping his golden brown tabby head into each group he passed.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of longing as I looked back at him

from across camp. Unfortunately, my mate and I had been missing each other today, which I hated, of course.

We hadn't been able to speak to each other much with all of the hustle and bustle of battle preparation. We'd obviously slept in our nest together as we usually did, but today had begun very quickly and early, and we were only able to exchange "good mornings", give each other quick licks on the cheek, and then get to work.

Thornclaw hadn't even gotten the chance to ask about my night, the night in which he knew was going to be my visit to the Dark Forest. And having been able to catch the anxious, pleading look in his pale blue eyes this morning, I was sure that definitely wanted to know.

I mean, I could so easily sense his worry for me. He'd vocalized it profusely, for one, but I'd seen him casting me sidelong glances whenever I was in his sight the entire day.

I wanted so badly to both remind him that I can't have his help in my plan, as much as I'd like it, and also to reassure him that I was going to be okay, and that he had no reason to worry for me at all. *At least, I've always assumed that I'll be able to go through with my plan without...*

I then shook my head quickly once again. *Don't be ridiculous. Whatever comes of this plan, you're ready for it, and you're going to come out safely on the other side. And with that, everyone I care about will be safe too.*

I then pulled myself back to the present once again. *What you can control, Lilypetal. What you can control.*

I paused in my travel and looked up to see that the sun was not directly above me anymore. In fact, it had nearly disappeared from sight at this point. *Another day of training has nearly come and gone already, it seems!*

I then found my eyes falling near the Highledge, where the fresh-kill pile sat. I nearly let out a gasp as I quickly noticed how miniscule it was. It probably couldn't even be considered a pile anymore.

And the prey that was there all looked at least a day old. *Not many ThunderClan cats have even taken the time to eat!* I realized, briefly looking back at all of my Clanmates in the clearing behind me. *I suppose none of us have had much opportunity to eat, even though we should...*

I then turned to face all of my Clanmates, narrowing my eyes as I began to search for a certain dark brown tabby pelt. *Tigerstar's son... where are you?*

I then hesitantly approached the ThunderClan deputy, who was currently training near the nursery with Brackenfur, Sorreltail, and Brightheart.

Praying to StarClan that I wasn't disturbing him, I slowly paused just behind Brambleclaw and gently tapped my tail to his shoulder. "Brambleclaw?" I called to him kindly. "Do you have a moment?"

Brambleclaw quickly looked over that shoulder, only looking briefly startled before nodding to his fellow trainees and turning around to face me. "Sure," he meowed to me, his amber eyes now warm and welcoming. "What's going on?"

I found myself suddenly growing nervous with the direct question. "Oh, well..." I began after a moment's hesitation. "I just noticed that the fresh-kill pile is a bit sparse, and I figure that all of us will have to replenish our hunger at some point..."

Brambleclaw nodded back to me, his eyes glowing with interest. "Yes, go on?"

"I wondered if we should maybe send out a hunting patrol?" I finally proposed to the deputy. "Just a small, really quick one? I wouldn't want to deprive any cat of their training, but-"

Brambleclaw quickly cut me off as I had been about to sheepishly go back on my words. "No, Lilypetal - that's a great idea," he insisted to me, flashing me a reassuring look.

He then peered past me to look towards the fresh-kill pile, or... *small collection*, rather. "Eating hasn't really taken priority, has it?"

the tabby tom then purred, echoing my earlier thoughts.

I purred with amusement. "Definitely not!" I agreed, then proceeding to give Brambleclaw a nod and pad away. "Alright then, I'll go ahead and set-"

I then cut myself off and stopped in my tracks. I let out a frustrated huff, shook my head quickly and then tapped in with the tip of my tail. "Oh my goodness, what am I doing?" I exclaimed, my voice full of laughter as I ran back to Brambleclaw. "That's your job!" *And apparently, Lilypetal, it's your job to be an idiot.*

Brambleclaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter, but his amber eyes were thoughtful. "No, that's alright, Lilypetal. You can go ahead and send a few cats out," he reassured to me, lashing his tail towards Brackenfur, Sorreltail and Brightheart. "That'd be of great help to me, actually."

Sending out a hunting patrol myself? Holy moly... My heart nearly skipped a beat, and my eyes slowly widened. "Okay, if you're sure," I breathed, giving Brambleclaw a questioning look.

"I definitely am," he meowed to me, giving me one last nod before turning back to his group. "I trust you!"

I stood in place for just a moment, letting out a long sigh. "I'm glad," I whispered, too quietly for the tom to be able to hear me.

I then turned around, my nerves slowly being replaced with excitement as I began to look among all of the cats, trying to figure out who might be able to spare a bit of time to catch some prey for their Clanmates.

I ended up sending out Icecloud, Nightwing, Lightningpaw and Berrynose. I'd called them all over and informed them that Brambleclaw had decided to send out a hunting patrol, rather than mentioning that it had been my idea. But I didn't want cats to think that I was throwing myself in some authority position that I didn't have.

I suppose that I had made good choices, because luckily, all four

cats had been willing to go. I have to admit, I'd partly chosen one of my kits to go because it truthfully brought me so much fear to see them all in such intense battle training for such an intense battle that was yet to come.

I watched the hunting patrol venture out, my dear Lightningpaw trailing in the back with his mentor, before taking another look around camp once again. My eyes fell on the fresh-kill pile once again, and after a bit of observation, I came to realize that it actually seemed to contain some fairly fresh-looking catches.

I then found myself glancing up at the Highledge, as I began to think of one cat that I could be *sure* hadn't had a single bite to eat since this catastrophe had come about.

I then urgently ran up to the fresh-kill pile, picked up a plump young shrew, and then leapt up onto the stone ledge to head for the den that sat at the top of it.

I paused just in front of its entrance. "Firestar?" I called out into the den softly.

The pacing pawsteps I'd been hearing from inside suddenly stopped. "Is that Lilypetal?" a deeper voice replied. "Come on in."

With that, I bent down and slid into the ThunderClan leader's den. Once I'd made it inside, I lashed my tail in greeting to the ginger tom. "Hi!" I purred to Firestar before setting the shrew down. "I thought that you'd maybe need something to eat..." I murmured, pushing the prey towards him. "Unless you've been eating your prey outside of camp, I don't think you've consumed anything in the past couple of days!"

Firestar flashed me a brief look of appreciation before sighing and closing his green eyes. "And you would be correct," he responded solemnly. "The idea of food hasn't really been able to cross my mind..."

Just as I was about to give the leader a supportive, sympathetic touch on the shoulder with my tail, he shook his head quickly and walked just in front of the prey I'd set down. "But thank you,

Lilypetal," he meowed warmly.

He then let his gaze fall to the ground. "Shrew - good choice."

I let out a little purr of amusement, shrugging. "I think I've seen you eating it a good amount of times."

"Would you like to share it with me?"

My eyes widened back at the tom, not being able to help feeling a bit honored that the leader wanted to share a meal with *me*. "Really?" I questioned Firestar.

"Of course," he insisted as he settled down on the den floor. "You've been up on your paws for a while - you're practically a blur out there!"

He then lashed his tail towards the empty spot next to him. "Sit down, take a moment and eat something."

I finally decided to settle down next to the ThunderClan leader as I let out an exhausted huff. Because, honestly, Firestar wasn't wrong - I was feeling a bit drained, and quite pooped from my busy day. "Okay, I will. Thank you, Firestar," I purred to him, taking a bite of the shrew at his prompting.

Once I'd swallowed it, I let out a humored sniff. "I will admit, a moment to rest does sound nice," I meowed to the tom, "but I guess I've felt too guilty to even consider taking one."

Firestar purred with amusement after he'd taken his first bite. "You've always been like that, haven't you?" he observed. "Those hazel eyes of yours are always on the goal."

I purred with amusement as well. "I suppose so!" I replied. "I really do try."

"Graystripe has told me before that he gets exhausted just watching you on a normal day," Firestar went on, his voice full of laughter. "You can't relax until you're sure that all of your duties are done. And sometimes... you even seek out *more*."

I fully *mrrowed* with laughter at those words, quite entertained by the fact that the great Graystripe was exhausted watching me do my everyday tasks. "Well, I just want to be of help wherever I can. I want others to be able to depend on me," I replied to the leader honestly. *And some of them are, without them fully realizing it yet.*

I then looked away from the tom and I took a deep breath. "Making sure that their needs are tended to, that they're kept safe..." I murmured. I then tried to brighten my gaze as I looked back at Firestar. "And it honestly all doesn't take much drive when you come to live in a Clan like this. It all feels so easy to want to defend them to the end." *But... I hopefully won't have to.*

I then pushed these darker thoughts away and gave Firestar a light nudge. "I'm sure you know how that all feels."

Firestar's green eyes glittered. "I do," he replied. He then nudged me right back and winked at me. "Definitely sounds like something we might have in common."

His eyes then seemed to glow with pride just as I purred once again. "But you certainly don't need to remind me of that, Lilypetal," the ThunderClan leader went on. "You've always had a certain gleam of determination in your eyes, from the day that you first arrived in ThunderClan."

I stared back at the ThunderClan leader, already feeling completely toppled over by his praise, and he simply gave me a sincere nod before continuing. "I was blown away by the amount of spirit and optimism that I saw there," he observed, looking off as if he were staring at his own memories. "And you know what? Since then, it's seemed to grow stronger, darker and deeper with every moon. And you've grown along with it. It's always taken you forward, as determination should."

I managed to feel even more overwhelmed with the leader's words. He had no idea, but they'd made me feel even more confident of something that I'd once been made fun of for all of the time. "Thank you, Firestar," I meowed to him. "You honestly have no idea how nice that is to hear." *It's absolutely wonderful to hear...*

"Well, I'm only speaking the truth. I'm very proud of you," Firestar purred, briefly touching his nose to my ear. I then met his gaze again, his eyes revealing a bit of sadness. "And I know that your mother would be proud of you, too."

As I always was, I instantly was overcome with grief at the mention of my mother. "Great StarClan, I hope that she is," I whispered, closing my eyes. "I know that she's still here with me, in a way, but I still wish more than anything that she were still here, *with* me."

I then made sure to flash Firestar a reassuring look. "I obviously have endless amounts of support here in ThunderClan, but..." I trailed off for a moment, reminding myself that it was okay to share my feelings with my leader. "I miss having the support of a parent, you know? Especially in these challenging times, I'm reminded that that's not... not there anymore."

Although I wasn't looking at Firestar now, I could see his compassionate, sympathetic gaze burning into me as he put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "I completely understand, Lilypetal," he meowed softly.

I then looked at him to look into his sincere green eyes. "But I hope that you know that that role doesn't have to remain empty in our life," he continued. "Even had you never found Mistpelt out in the forest all those moons ago, it would have been filled then, too."

For several, several moments, I simply stared back at the Clan leader, overwhelmed with so much gratitude and affection at the leader's words.

Aside from Smudge back when I lived in the Twolegplace, I'd never had a very stable father figure in my life. And since I'd come to the Clans, I'd obviously never figured that I'd have one, considering my real father was long dead. And also... not a good cat.

But it was in this moment that I realized that I'd had one this entire time. "I... I... Thank you, Firestar. I never, ever doubted that," I forced out, my voice full of emotion. "I mean, your faith in me is what has allowed me to be able to grow at all. You've given me undeniable support, and I can't even begin to put into words how

thankful I am."

Firestar then touched his muzzle to my head for just a moment. "I've been more than happy to guide you, Lilypetal," he meowed. And when he pulled away, I was both surprised and concerned to see his green eyes briefly flashing with sadness as he stood up. "And I will continue to as long as I am here. And beyond that, too."

Before I could even come up with a reply to Firestar, he shook his head and looked towards the den entrance. "Well, as much as I hate to, I wonder if I should send you back out now?" he murmured. "Moonhigh is nearly here, and I'm sure that you'd like to make your contributions before you head off to sleep."

I nodded in agreement to the ThunderClan leader as I stood up as well. "You are most definitely not wrong," I meowed as I trotted ahead. "Duty calls!"

I then paused and looked back towards Firestar as we both shared a purr of amusement. "Goodnight, Firestar," I murmured to him more softly. "And thank you again... for everything."

Firestar dipped his head to me. "Of course. Goodnight, Lilypetal."

I flashed the leader one last warm, grateful look before finally sliding out of the den. And sure enough, just as he had said, the sun had completely disappeared, and the moon was beginning to rise.

But it seemed as if ThunderClan hadn't really noticed; it might as well have been sunhigh from how alive the camp was. The whole Clan still seemed to be out and about, completely focused as they worked in their training groups.

I figured that it would be quite a while before the camp fully quieted down, and everyone decided to go to sleep.

And honestly, this was to my luck, as I realized that I wasn't quite ready to leap back into the action just yet; I needed to take a bit more of a moment.

I leaped down from the Highledge, deciding that I was going to find a place out in the forest to sit for just a little while and gather my

thoughts before I returned to training.

Just before I made my way through the camp entrance, I paused and quickly whipped my head around towards my Clanmates, looking for a certain golden brown tabby pelt to bring as company.

But I was surprised to immediately notice that Thornclaw seemed to be nowhere in sight. I felt an extreme pang of disappointment before finally crawling through the gorse tunnel. *You'll have the chance to speak with him soon,* I reassured myself as the shadows of the trees fell onto my fur. *I'll just find him later.*

I then broke into a run, knowing exactly where I wanted to go. Mistpelt was still on the brain, and while Firestar's support and comfort had helped me immensely, I knew that I still wanted the same from my mother, in the one way that I felt like I could.

The colors of dusk and daylight continued to disappear as I pelted through the forest, the wind against my fur beginning to feel more and more chilly.

Once I knew that I was closer to my destination, I slowed down and settled on a fairly fast trot as I began to scan my surroundings. *Wow, the water sure is high right now,* I observed as I looked out towards the lake.

I then looked up at the trees. Even with newleaf having arrived, some of these trees haven't budded. Interesting, I then thought, noticing some trees that were pale and leafless. *They must be dead. One of those could probably fall down with just a little push...*

I then abruptly stopped in my tracks when a flash of purple came into my vision. *And the lavender patches look as beautiful and vibrant as ever...* I thought as I settled down, having made it to my spot.

I then let my head rest on top of my paws as I lied down in the lavender and stared out towards the lake. Then, as the sweet, yet sharp scent of the lavender began to flood through my nose, I tried to pretend that my own mother was sitting there beside me. *Mistpelt, I haven't heard from you at all since you've died,* I said to her in my thoughts. *I need your support more than ever now...*

I then quickly shot up to a standing position when I thought I heard pawsteps slowly getting louder and louder behind me. My heard began to pound of my chest as I thought of all of the possibilities of whose they could be.

But that fear suddenly became an overwhelming amount of relief, warmth, and happiness as I turned to see Thornclaw arriving into the clearing. *Another undoubtable, amazing support system that I could never bear to lose...*

My mate's pale blue eyes were gleaming in the moonlight as he emerged through some bushes. "Hm, I figured that I'd find you here," he murmured, his gaze briefly flashing with mischief.

I could barely stand to hold down my excitement as I ran up to meet the tom. "Aw, well, aren't you just so smart," I teased, a purr rumbling in my throat as I pressed against my mate and leaned my head into his chest. "Hi, Thornclaw."

He pulled me closer to him with a paw. "Hi, Lilypetal," he whispered back to me, touching his muzzle to my head as he also purred. I closed my eyes with ease, and thanked StarClan that I was finally getting needed time just to be with my mate - the love of my life, for just a bit amongst everything going on.

And after the two of us simply took several moments close together, drinking in each other's familiar scents, Thornclaw pulled his head away so that he could meet my gaze. "So, I just had a little talk with our firstborn."

I cocked a single eyebrow. "Did you?" I purred. "Oh, dear. What did she do this time?"

Thornclaw sniffed and gave a shrug. "Oh, nothing but be the amazing daughter that we raised," he replied, his gaze full of pride. And after the two of us exchanged a proud glance, he went on. "I just had to remind her of that a bit. She's been putting on a brave face for us during all of this, it seems."

"As she always does..." I breathed, love for our courageous, spirited, independent and dauntless daughter growing inside of me. I then let

my eyes fall to the ground. "And as much as I don't want to hear of one of my kits ever feeling any sort of fear... I can't help but feel a bit relieved when I hear that. Because... I'm definitely doing the same."

Thornclaw instantly seemed to know what my words meant, as he always did. He sighed and gently ran his tail down my flank. "You know that it doesn't have to be this scary, Lilypetal," he meowed softly. "The Dark Forest battle, sure. But all of this with Ashfur..."

He trailed off for a moment before going on. "It doesn't have to be this way, I hope that you know that."

My heart then seemed to melt as I continued to stare into his pale blue eyes. "I could be right there with you," he then murmured, "in whatever this plan of yours is."

"I know," I whispered, placing one of my paws on Thornclaw's. "And you have no idea how many times I've considered that. I want you next to me more than anything."

"Then, why aren't you letting me?"

"Oh, Thornclaw - it's not that I'm not letting you," I meowed my mate, hating to see the fear and pain in his eyes. "It's because I *can't*."

Thornclaw then stood up. "Nonsense!" he insisted. He then seemed to take a moment to contain himself, taking a deep breath before saying his next words. "Do you remember, all those moons ago, when the two of us were about to venture out to find the exiled Ashfur, and make sure that he left the forest for good? We were both insisting to each other that we could do the deed on our own, to prevent the other from being in danger."

My mate then sat down once again, his words seeming to spill out of him with his passion. "You told me - either I'm coming with you, or you're staying here," he went on. His gaze then sharpened as he looked back at me. "And that is what I insist to you now. It's what I'll always insist. Either I'm going into danger with you, or I go in your place."

I had to shut my eyes for a moment as they began to well up with emotion. Even after all of this time, the love and support that I received from this tom absolutely blew me away. "And it's what I'll always insist to you," I meowed huskily after a few heartbeats. "And it's what I'm also insisting to you now, Thornclaw, because you're staying right here."

Before my mate could protest, I went on. "I must do this on my own. I refuse for it to be any other way," I insisted, hardening my meow just a bit. "Ashfur's not going to be allowed to lay a claw on anyone else but me."

Thornclaw, to his dismay, finally seemed to be accepting the fact that there was no use in fighting me anymore. "Why do you have to risk him laying a claw on you at all, Lilypetal?" he nearly whispered.

I took a deep breath and looked out towards the lake. "For you, for Goldenshine, for Snowflight, for Mistpelt... for all of our kits..." I answered, confidence in my plan rising all over again as I thought about all of the cats that I was doing this for. "For this Clan..."

"Lilypetal, I don't understand-"

"But you will," I softly demanded to Thornclaw, padding around so that we were face to face rather than flanking each other. "Thornclaw, you have to trust me. I'm not changing my mind, so all I can do is make you believe that I know what I'm doing. And I do."

To my surprise, Thornclaw let out a long sigh and sat down with my words. "I know that you do. I've never doubted that," he murmured. He then let out a snort. "And considering you're doing something so potentially dangerous, I hate that I find you so trustworthy."

He then let out a quiet purr of amusement, his eyes briefly glowing with affection. "Well, I hated that I found I liked a *lot* of great things about you when we first met... and look how that turned out, huh?"

"Oh, yeah," I purred back, leaning my head forward to lick my mate's nose. "I'd definitely say that something came out of that."

I pulled away to meet Thornclaw's glowing, loving gaze. But after a moment, it seemed to darken once again. "But I hope that you realize that your requests don't necessarily imply that I'm going to listen to them, Lilypetal," he declared, his eyes full of determination. He then took a step closer to me. "I'm always going to be right here beside you whether you like it or not, in whatever way that I can be."

"And beyond this, you will, just as I will be to you," I murmured, my voice likely barely audible from how thick from emotion it was. And yet another purr rose in my throat as I then stepped forward, and my mate and I bent our heads together. "I love you so much." *And I don't want to lose you. That's why I have to do this in the way I am.*

Thornclaw let out a soft chuckle and twinned his tail with mine. "I love you more," he whispered.

"Hm," I then grunted, pretending to be skeptical as I dug my head into my mate's shoulder, and we both looked out at the lake together. "I doubt that."

As I always was, I felt extremely comforted just by my mate's presence, and the fact that I now knew that he trusted me with my plan made me feel even more at ease. *If my mate didn't believe in me, it would be so hard not to question it all...*

And even if that hadn't been the case, just being with Thornclaw and speaking with him brought out all of the determination and power that I had inside of me. He brought out the best in me, and had since we had first become friends so long ago.

This moment was the first time all day that I felt not even a mouse-tail's amount of fear or uncertainty.

I was ready to take on Ashfur, the way I was supposed to.

Chapter 30

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

"...and I'm sending Foxleap, Toadstep and Rosepetal to RiverClan. They can share Ivypool and Swiftflight's moves with Mistystar's warriors."

I gave a slow nod, continuing to listen intently as Brambleclaw stood in the center of ThunderClan's camp amongst his Clanmates - giving them their positions for the Dark Forest battle. Each time the deputy gave a new order to someone, their eyes either seemed to flash with eagerness and excitement, or complete fear.

I was still awaiting my assignment. And while I felt consistent nerves and apprehension for what was ahead, luckily the anticipation of hearing what I'd be doing in this battle unlike any other was actually a bit exciting to me.

So, I pricked my ears, growing even more alert as Brambleclaw then began to scan his amber eyes around the cats gathered. "Any cat's name that I didn't mention is going to stay here," the leader continued, his eyes dark. "We can't be too generous with the amount of warriors that we send off."

Well, then. I guess that I'm in my own camp for this battle, I realized as I stood up, trying to pick out all of the other cats that Brambleclaw hadn't named. *A good amount of other cats, too.*

I had to admit that I was somewhat relieved by this, for many reasons. While having to encounter cats like Blossomfall or Birchfall was awkward enough, considering how I'd made my past in the Dark Forest known to my Clanmates, I wondered what it would be like having to face Dark Forest trainees in other Clans? I mean, would they even be siding with their Clan at all?

My fur began to bristle as this question crossed my mind. *And...*

what about Breezepelt? I then thought, my stomach twisting with discomfort as I thought of my father, who seemed to be letting his own anger affect him and his decisions more and more every day. It was clear that Brokenstar, his Dark Forest mentor, had been getting the best of him. *What side is he going to be fighting on?*

A chill then ran down my spine. *I think I may know that answer... but I don't like it.*

Lionblaze's sharp meow then broke into my thoughts. "Firestar also wants some runners to pass messages between the Clans during the battle," the pale tabby tom called out to Brambleclaw.

I turned to look back at the ThunderClan deputy as he seemed to ponder his foster son's words. Then, after a moment, he gave a decisive nod. "Molepaw and Cherrypaw can do that," he announced. "And Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw and Emberpaw can as well."

Beyond those words, nothing else that Brambleclaw said could process in my head. My own immense terror was blocking them out - the immense terror that came with the realization that Cherrypaw was going to be one of the Clans' messengers.

Obviously, the prospect of the ginger tabby she-cat actually fighting among cats that I knew to be extremely dangerous would frighten me as well, but to think of her being exposed to the fighting going on in not just one Clan, but all of them... running all over the forest where any Dark Forest cat could be lurking, worried me tremendously. *And she won't be around for me to be able to be sure that she's okay...*

I then looked over towards Cherrypaw as I tried to battle my rising fears. I tried to meet her gaze, but she wasn't even looking in my direction, looking excited and amused as Molepaw complained about not being able to fight with the warriors. *Of course she's excited,* I thought as I let out a sigh. *Nothing scares that she-cat... she's one of the bravest cats that I know.*

I then reluctantly and nervously averted my gaze over to Poppyfrost, who I was surprised to see was actually looking *back* at me. Her blue eyes were clear - much more than they usually were if

they were staring in my direction - and thoughtful.

I found that I was quite entertained trying to figure out what the older tortoiseshell she-cat could be thinking. Hm. She probably thinks that I'm worried about my way of winning my Clanmates over is going to be put in danger, I mused bitterly.

I then forced myself to push that muse away. *I can't think like that right now.*

I then took a deep breath. *Not when I'm going to talk to her,* I thought, my heart beginning to pound harder and faster. *There is so much at stake right now; so much being risked. There's no time to waste.*

As I continued to well up with fear, I closed my eyes for a moment and took another deep breath. *There's no time to waste,* I repeated to myself.

I then glanced back at Cherrypaw, who was now with the other apprentices, listening to Brambleclaw's directions. And my stomach began to flutter as I let my eyes rest on her once again, and I was reminded of why I was going to speak with Poppyfrost at all. *And I can't even begin to imagine the amount of regret I'd feel if I backed out. I've done enough of that already.*

Feeling a bit more determined and certain, I then drove myself to look back at Poppyfrost, who luckily hadn't left her spot. And gathering up every single ounce of bravery I had, I then let my paws slowly take me to her. And as I began to approach, I was bracing myself for her to let out a hiss and walk away at any moment.

But she stayed put, which almost made me even more nervous. *If she walked away, I would have more time to gather my thoughts... and stop being so* scared*, for StarClan's sake!*

I could feel Poppyfrost's gaze burning into my dark gray fur as I then paused in front of her. *There's a reason why you're so scared, Swiftflight,* I reminded myself, thinking about Snowstorm's words from just a couple of nights before. *This is something that you care about, so tell Poppyfrost that.*

Yet, when I finally met Poppyfrost's blue gaze and began to open my mouth, thinking that I was ready with something to say... *nothing* came out. My brain had gone completely blank.

I tried to hold back a growl of frustration. *Come on, Swiftflight! You can defy your murderous Dark Forest mentor and stand up for yourself to the entire Clan without a second thought... so get it together!*

There was a horrible, unbearable length of silence as I tried to muster up my courage once again and decide how I wanted to start. The longer it lasted, the more sympathy I was actually beginning to feel for Poppyfrost, who was having to simply watch while I stood like an idiot.

And to my surprise, it was actually Poppyfrost who broke this silence, letting out a sigh. "Swiftflight," she muttered simply, giving me a curt nod.

I looked up from where I'd been staring at the ground, trying to hide my utter shock that the she-cat had bothered to greet me at all. "Poppyfrost," I replied, returning the nod hesitantly.

"You alright?" the older warrior then asked, managing to make me feel even more surprised.

I blinked a few times back at her. "A-am I alright?"

I felt my fur slightly begin to bristle as Poppyfrost's blue eyes then narrowed. "You seem... nervous," she observed.

I had to hold back a snort. *Well, at least it's established.* "Well... I-I..." I then stammered.

I then forced myself to lift my head up a bit more. And there's nothing wrong with being nervous. "Yes, Poppyfrost. I am nervous," I admitted to her, as reluctant as I initially felt doing so.

But those initial reluctant thoughts quickly came back after those words, and I found myself pulling back, trying to mask the meaning behind my words. "Um... Brambleclaw making the plans... definitely a little scary."

"Interesting," Poppyfrost then murmured. Her gaze might as well have been scorching into my fur. "I'd think that you'd be nothing but excited about the prospect of battle."

Suddenly, with those passive-aggressive words, all of the anxiety I'd been feeling suddenly disintegrated as quickly as if they'd been struck by lightning. "Oh, come on! Am I nothing but an unfeeling, sadistic clump of fur to you?" I hissed to Poppyfrost as I stood up.

And now that I knew that I had the ability to actually make full sentences, I took advantage of the moment. "I'm sorry if you can't even bother to try and see it, but I have feelings, Poppyfrost!" I insisted to her, trying to ignore the alarmed look in her blue eyes. "Feelings of fear for this battle, for instance. Because I *am* scared about that believe it or not."

The more I spoke, the more vulnerable that I was getting, the weirder that I felt. But I knew that I could let feeling *weird* stop me anymore. "And I have feelings of hurt when you don't even try to trust me..."

I then hesitated for a few moments before nearly whispering, "And... I have feelings of deep, deep hurt when I know that I can't be around your daughter."

I simply took a deep breath, waiting nervously as I watched Poppyfrost blink with surprise. And I actually felt my stomach beginning to hurt when she finally opened her mouth. "Don't you think that I want to believe all of that, Swiftflight?" the she-cat sighed, her eyes full of uncertainty. "Don't you think that I want to allow her to be around you?"

I held back a hiss as I fully turned to face Poppyfrost once again. "Then why can't you?" I demanded to her. And just before I could continue to reprimand her, I held myself back, shocked at where these *feelings* that I was presenting to Poppyfrost were taking me.

I'd hadn't let my feelings drive my actions or my words many times in my life. *But they must now.*

I began to shift my paws back and forth. "You sure have never

seemed like you wanted to think of me in any sort of positive regard," I then commented to Poppyfrost, keeping my voice even this time.

The tortoiseshell she-cat let out a sigh. "Well, unfortunately, when it comes to my kits, I will think that way about any cat that steps into their lives," she meowed to me, her gaze slowly moving towards where her two kits stood a little ways away. "I don't want either of them to be hurt, and they run that risk every time they befriend someone."

My heart then skipped a beat as she quickly shifted her eyes towards me again. "You, Swiftflight, were someone that I thought would hurt Cherrypaw, and I don't think I need to remind you of why."

"No. You don't," I muttered in reply, all of the insults that the she-cat had thrown at me beginning to resurface in my memory. I then shook my head quickly, as if to get rid of them. "But those reasons are all things of the past, Poppyfrost!" I then insisted to her, knowing my words to be completely true.

But as I had expected, Poppyfrost still wasn't seeing it that way. "How am I supposed to figure that out, Swiftflight?" she then asked, her voice rising just a bit. "When one is a cold-hearted, hostile cat for... let's say... *all* of their apprenticeship..."

She then hardened her gaze back at me. "A cat who I now know trained in the Dark Forest willingly," she went on, sharpening her meow. "It'd be pretty hard for me to believe that that's all 'in the past' in the blink of an eye."

I took a deep breath as Poppyfrost's words processed. As stubborn as she had seen with her motives, I had to admit that I understood and sympathized with her explanation. But either way, she was still standing by her word, and I needed to do something about it.

I kept my gaze on the older warrior as best as I could. "But what if that cat were to come up to you and tell you themselves that they had changed?"

Poppyfrost's gaze was unreadable as she stared back at me. "It depends," she muttered, wrapping her tail around her paws.

It wasn't the most welcoming opportunity, but I still took it. "Well, I have changed," I began, then letting out a shrug. "I'm trying to, at least. And listen... you don't have to believe me. I won't like it, but it's your right."

I then took another deep breath. "Either way, I'm still going to try and convince you," I went on definitively as I took a step closer to Poppyfrost. "Look, I completely *acknowledge* how I was in the past - I'm not trying to justify *any* of my behavior, because I know that I was at the top tier of the mouse-brains."

I felt slightly more encouraged when I heard Poppyfrost let out a quiet, amused sniff. "I let the... dare I say, *darkness* of the Dark Forest pull me away from who I was," I continued, growing a bit uncomfortable with the current subject, but I trudged on. "It took me longer than I'd like to realize that, but I have now."

I then tried to flash the she-cat a reassuring look. "And now, I'm honestly trying to do nothing but prove that I'm more than what the Dark Forest tried to make me into. I want to truly be there for my Clanmates, show genuine care for others..."

I then shyly looked down to the ground again. "...develop real relationships with some cats that make me... very happy."

Considering how much I had just said, I wasn't at all surprised when Poppyfrost didn't respond immediately. Luckily, her gaze seemed to be rid of all hostility, and only seemed to be full of contemplation. "I see..." she murmured after several heartbeats.

She then flashed me an inquisitive look, one of her eyebrows raising. "*Some cats*, huh?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Yes. Some cats," I replied, trying to shoot Poppyfrost a hinting look. "And look, if you don't take anything away from what I'm trying to tell you, at least know this - I don't want to see... some cats hurt just as much as you do. I..."

I then trailed off for a moment, realizing that now, I had absolutely no reason to beat around the bush. I took a deep breath, hoping to collect a bit more courage. "I would never even think of bringing any harm to Cherrypaw," I then reassured Poppyfrost.

I then gave a lash of my tail. "And if I ever even come close, you can personally drown me in the lake. I'd even do it myself."

"Oh, my," Poppyfrost purred after a sniff. "I'd like to see that!"

I managed an amused sniff as well. But I had to admit, I had no idea if the older she-cat was joking or not. "So..." I murmured, looking off to the side. "I assume that everything I'm saying probably just sound like empty words to you."

I then looked back at Poppyfrost, my eyes widening with bewilderment when she didn't automatically agree with my words.

And what she said next nearly made my mouth drop open. "No..." she eventually sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. "Not really."

My heart began to beat faster all over again. "T-they don't?" I asked, my voice nearly cracking.

"No, Swiftflight," Poppyfrost replied, standing up. She then shrugged and let out another sniff. "One reason being because I don't think I've ever seen you say so much at once..."

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Understandable."

"But I also truly believe you. I can't believe it, but I do," Poppyfrost went on. She then took a pawsteps forward, and sat closer beside me. "It's like I said, I've always wanted to trust you, and see you beyond what I've always known you to be, but I've never been given any reason to."

What?! I thought irritably. *Did the fox attack just not happen at all?*

Just as I was about to open my mouth to protest, Poppyfrost flashed me a warning look and raised her tail up in the air. "At least, not any reason that gave me enough reassurance," she corrected herself, her voice a bit sharper. She then took a deep breath, and her gaze

softened with admiration. "Not until now. It takes a lot to stand up for yourself like you are."

I couldn't help but let out another snort, being thankful that Poppyfrost was acknowledging how new all of this was for me. "Oh, you have no idea..." I murmured.

"Along with that..." Poppyfrost continued after she'd seemed to have fallen deep into thought for a few heartbeats. "I suppose that I also have to respect Cherrypaw and her own choices. She's not a little kit anymore. In fact, she's going to be a warrior soon."

For some reason, my stomach seemed to flutter at that thought. *We'd be able to spend so much more time together...* I realized longingly. *Being warriors alongside each other... and we could maybe...*

I then had to push away my thoughts to continue to listen to Poppyfrost. "Yes, she is young, and being the kindhearted she-cat that she is, she will try to see the good in everyone," she went on. She then nodded to me. "But you, Swiftflight... I can see so easily how much she admires and cares for you unlike anyone else. And while she is very compassionate towards others, she is smart too. She wouldn't make hasty decisions. She knows what she's doing."

I couldn't help but nod eagerly back at the she-cat. "She definitely does." *She's so intelligent and level-headed...*

I then had to shake my head quickly to bring myself back to focus. "And you're right. I'd like to think that she has been able to see the part of me that I want everyone else to see, and..." I trailed off for just a moment, looking away from Poppyfrost. "I really hope that someday you, especially, can see me in the way that she does."

I could see the older warrior's narrowed eyes staring back at me out of the corner of my eye. "...Why?" she queried in a way that almost made it seem like she were asking an apprentice of hers a question that she already knew the answer to.

And it was clear here that she knew the answer to this question, too. She was just waiting for me to have the guts to say it.

So, I finally did. I straightened myself up, and looked straight into the she-cat's eyes. "So that you'll let me see her," I meowed. At this point, I didn't care one bit about the pleading in my voice. "I want to be able to see Cherrypaw again."

I then stood up, not needing to think about a single word I was saying. "Please, Poppyfrost. I understand why you'd be scared, but I want you to know that I care for Cherrypaw more than I do myself. If you let me see her, I'd protect her. I'd protect her where you can't," I went on.

I then brushed the tip of my tail against Poppyfrost's shoulder, giving her a hard, yet reassuring look. "And if she were ever to get hurt, it wouldn't be because of me."

Poppyfrost hadn't pulled away from my touch. In fact, her gaze only seemed to grow warmer after I'd finished speaking. But nevertheless, I stood in silence, terrified of hearing the response to my declaration.

And I felt lightheaded for just a moment as her eyes revealed that she'd come to some conclusion in her own thoughts. "Well..." the tortoiseshell she-cat eventually breathed. "Luckily for you, I don't think you'll have to wait for 'someday' in order to do that."

Hold on...

I actually had to blink a few times, actually feeling quite certain that I was dreaming for a few heartbeats. "Wait..." I meowed, my voice shaking slightly. "Are you saying...?"

Poppyfrost then let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. "I'm saying that you two are free to see each other, talk together, share shrews, annoyingly stare into each other's eyes..." The she-cat then flashed me a teasing look before going on. "You two make each other really happy. I can see that. It just took me a while to let myself allow it to all happen."

She then hardened her gaze once again, standing up and taking a step closer to me. "And I hope you are very aware of what could happen if you put a paw wrong..."

I nodded back at the she-cat, her intimidation not even phasing me one bit anymore. No feelings aside from utter shock and complete happiness could take over right now. "I am fully aware. I am completely and consciously aware!" I insisted. I then stood up as well, looking gratefully back at Poppyfrost. "Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me."

She slowly nodded back at me, a knowing look in her eyes. "Oh, I think that I do," she murmured, giving me a nod in farewell before turning around to pad away.

But she'd only made it a few pawsteps before she paused and looked over her shoulder back at me. "So, are you going to tell her?" she asked me, a single one of her eyebrows raising again.

I furrowed my own eyebrows, genuinely confused by the question. "Tell her what?"

"That you love her."

My stomach twisted up into a knot, and a rush of heat ran through my entire body. "What?" I exclaimed, suddenly feeling just as discombobulated as I had when I'd approached Poppyfrost. "*Love* her? I... well, I don't know if-"

The tortoiseshell she-cat seemed to be holding back a purr of amusement as she shrugged. "I mean, I have to assume. Something's there that's pretty obvious," she meowed warmly. "And considering we're talking about you, that's saying a lot. I saw the way you were looking at her just now."

She then sniffed. "I mean, look at how hard you tried to gain my approval just so that you could 'see' her."

Then, with those words, she gave me a wink, and then proceeded to finally pad away to speak with her mate, Berrynose.

I stayed exactly where I was for several moments, still hardly being able to believe everything that had just occurred. I'm sure many of my Clanmates around me thought that I was delirious with fever.

Great StarClan... I feel as if my heart has just gone through an entire six

moon apprenticeship.

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The sense of foreboding that circulated the ThunderClan camp was more apparent than the clearest, cleanest stream could ever be. And as calm as everything currently was, the tension was oozing like blood from a fresh wound.

It had now been almost a full day since I'd spoken with Poppyfrost, and training was just now winding down with moonhigh approaching. Many cats were beginning to make their way to their dens while some were grabbing some late-night meals, or going over some moves at the last moment.

I planned to head to the warriors den to rest as soon as I could, for I was absolutely exhausted. After my talk with Poppyfrost, I'd unfortunately had to leap right back into training as it'd begun. I'd switched off through many groups of cats to train them.

And although I'd helped all of them to the best of my ability, my head was set on the thing that I'd hopefully get to do once training was done.

But now, I was free, and there was only one cat on my mind right now.

From where I stood near the Highledge, I began to scan my eyes around the camp in search of Cherrypaw. My stomach seemed to flip upside down as I quickly spotted her near the elders den, speaking with Emberpaw.

The tabby-and-white she-cat seemed to just be leaving. She touched her nose to Cherrypaw's cheek before lashing her tail in farewell and trotting over towards the apprentices den.

The beat of my heart seemed to double in speed as Cherrypaw stayed exactly where she was, leaving me the perfect opportunity to go up and speak to her. I felt so nervous that I could barely stand it. *I seriously wonder if I was ever this nervous back in the Dark Forest...*

But I then took a deep breath, having to remind myself once again

of Snowstorm's words. *But surely it wouldn't make you so nervous if it wasn't something... or someone, that you cared about so much?*

Scraping up every piece of determination and bravery I had, just as I'd had to with Poppyfrost, I began to pad towards Cherrypaw.

The ginger tabby she-cat was slightly turned away from me, and her head was lifted up to the sky as she looked up at the stars of Silverpelt.

I felt my fur beginning to tingle as I looked at her, and I hardly realized that I'd nearly stopped in my tracks for a moment.

Not that she ever *didn't*, but the she-cat looked absolutely beautiful. The way that the moonlight fell on her fur, making it look silver, and the way that it made her amber eyes glitter. It also defined her slim, but strong and muscular figure. Her expression showed so much strength and ease. *She looks like a warrior,* I realized. *She's so lovely...*

My heart then nearly seemed to stop as I saw Cherrypaw flick her ears, as if my pawsteps were finally coming into earshot. She then looked over her shoulder, and I abruptly stopped walking once she'd seen me.

Her amber eyes flashed with surprise, but then quickly seemed to wash over with pain. "Swiftflight..." she breathed, her voice husky. "What are you doing here?"

I padded up so that I was standing just next to her. "Well, I live here," I muttered, attempting to lighten the mood.

And my heart lifted a bit as Cherrypaw actually let out one of her adorable laughs. "I mean, what are you doing here, next to me?" she then asked me, her moment of joy being very brief. "I didn't think that you wanted anything to do with me anymore."

Just as I was about to comfort the she-cat, and contradict everything that she was saying, her eyes flashed with alarm, and she spoke again. "And what about Poppyfrost?" she gasped.

I raised my eyebrows back at Cherrypaw, trying to hide the fact

that I very well knew the answer to that. "What about her?"

As I had expected, Cherrypaw seemed very concerned with my reply. "Well... Poppyfrost won't be happy seeing us together like this," she commented.

I slowly shook my head. "Poppyfrost won't mind at all, Cherrypaw."

I then had to hold back a purr as I watched Cherrypaw's eyes widen. "What?" she meowed, her tail beginning to twitch behind her. "How do you know?"

"Because she told me so," I replied, watching as realization slowly began to show on Cherrypaw's face.

"You... you talked to her?" the ginger she-cat whispered, her eyes glowing with amazement and shock. "But, Swiftflight, I thought that you didn't want-"

I quickly cut Cherrypaw off, making sure to get the truth out as soon as I could. I hated the fact that she had had to walk around believing a total lie for so many days now. "I was stupid, Cherrypaw," I meowed to her, then letting out a snort and rolling my eyes. "Well, I suppose I'm never *not* stupid, but-"

"Swiftflight, you are not stupid," Cherrypaw insisted to me, her eyes full of concern, and her voice full of laughter. "Not in the least. You're the smartest cat that I know."

I looked back at Cherrypaw, letting my gaze be a bit challenging. "I made you believe that I didn't return any of your feelings - that's pretty stupid."

Cherrypaw then let out a nearly inaudible gasp, and she stood up. She was clearly trying to keep herself from believing my words too soon, considering what she had believed up until now. "You... you return my feelings?" she asked me, her voice shaking.

I held my gaze on the she-cat, my heart continuing to pound like it never had before as I took a deep breath. "Yes, Cherrypaw. I do," I admitted. "I let my fears and... past beliefs get in the way of realizing that. Now, I've had to push all of that away, and I talked

to Poppyfrost this morning."

I then took another step closer to Cherrypaw, and a purr began to rise in my throat as I looked back at her baffled, yet cheerful expression. "And you were right," I went on to her. "All it took was to tell her myself about how I'm trying to change, and..."

I then paused for a moment as a wave of happiness rushed through me, almost as if I was re-living the amazing moment that I was telling Cherrypaw about all over again. "She believed me. She believes all of it, and she's going to give me a chance."

I then briefly let my tail brush against Cherrypaw's flank. "She's going to give... *us* a chance, you could say."

For a few moments, the ginger she-cat's mouth stayed open, but no words came out. She seemed too overwhelmed to speak for a moment.

"Us..." she then whispered. And after I gave her a nod, she stepped closer to me, speaking more loudly. "She is? She really is?"

I nodded, the warmth inside of me spreading like the strongest flood as I watched Cherrypaw become increasingly happier. "I wouldn't have let her go without being sure," I then reassured her.

"Oh, Swiftflight..." Cherrypaw then breathed as she blinked a few times. "That's absolutely amazing. I can't believe you... I..."

She then looked away from me, her demeanor growing a bit more shy. "I..." she continued to stammer as she blinked and shook her head. "My goodness, I think my head is spinning..."

I purred with amusement and tried to meet Cherrypaw's gaze again. "Well, in that case," I murmured, "you act really cute when your head is spinning."

I then felt another rush of warmth and affection as Cherrypaw giggled, finally looking back at me. "I... thank you," she purred. She then shrugged, her gaze a mix of a sort of light helplessness, and extreme joy. "I'm just so happy... I don't even know what to say!"

I took yet another step closer to the ginger tabby she-cat, pretty certain that everything I was currently experiencing was all one perfect dream.

But I suppose that either way, I was experiencing it, and that was all that I could ever ask for. "You don't have to say anything at all, Cherrypaw," I purred to her.

I then beckoned to her with my tail, feeling like my heart was about to explode, and one of the strongest purrs I'd ever felt was threatening to rise in my throat. "Just come here."

I was almost sure that my heart did explode once Cherrypaw let out a loud purr, and she ran up to press herself against me. Her sweet scent flooded into my nose, her soft fur was brushing mine, and I could feel her head pressing into my chest.

I suddenly felt extremely hot, my stomach felt light, and my head felt as if it were filled with fluff. But along with that, the purr that had been rising in my throat finally erupted, and I wrapped my tail around Cherrypaw to pull her closer to me, and I rested my head on hers.

For a moment, I was almost scared of this strange feeling, as it was very new, and was only ever something I'd felt with one cat, and that was the she-cat pressed against me at the very moment.

I was so overwhelmingly happy, and so filled with ease. While there had been many things that could bring me so much happiness over the past few moons, I could definitely say that the happiness I'd felt when I'd gotten Poppyfrost's approval, and then getting to be as close with Cherrypaw as I was now... truly felt like nothing else.

And yet, all that I had done today to get to this very moment still didn't feel complete. And with this realization, I found myself beginning to well up with fear and apprehension once again, an amount of fear and apprehension that was surely unmatched.

Because I knew that there was something else that I needed to tell Cherrypaw, and through the excitement of the two of us being able to do something as little as see each other again, I hadn't been able

to say it yet.

And despite how much happiness it would hopefully bring me after I told her, I knew that getting there was going to feel so new and strange. But I had to remind myself once again that it was okay to feel my feelings, and that it was okay to act on them.

And looking down at the she-cat that I was holding close to me, I knew that I wanted to; this kind, compassionate, intelligent, adorable, spirited she-cat who had been beside me unconditionally through my attempts at redemption.

And even before that, too. Even when I'd been such a closed-off, hostile cat, Cherrypaw had never hesitated to be kind to me, and be such a light in my life that seemed so dark and uncertain at the time. She never seemed to see the hostility that every other cat saw. *She... she was always able to see me beyond what Ashfur made me out to be...* I realized, overwhelmed with emotion as I continued to look down at Cherrypaw. *And it took me so long to appreciate it... to appreciate her. To realize just how much she means to me...*

I then felt my own ears flick with surprise. *How... how much she's* always *meant to me.*

A few moons ago, Snowstorm telling me all about she had thought that Cherrypaw had had feelings for me, for some reason, had once startled and daunted me. I wasn't sure why, but I suppose that all of the warmth and affection I'd always felt towards the ginger she-cat was one of the many things that my training in the Dark Forest had blinded me to.

And now that my eyes had been opened, I was finally able to acknowledge what I had tried to force down so many times. *Yes, I have feelings for her, but...*

I closed my eyes for a moment, praying to StarClan for strength as I touched my nose to Cherrypaw's ear. "Um... Cherrypaw?"

Cherrypaw pulled away so that she could meet my gaze. And as I looked into her concerned, warm amber eyes, my heart began to pound so loudly that I was certain that it would wake up everyone

in camp. "Yes, Swiftflight?" she meowed softly. "Is everything okay?"

I nodded and ran my tail down Cherrypaw's flank, making sure to quickly reassure the she-cat. "Yes... better than okay. I just..."

I then closed my eyes once again, having to hesitate for just a moment. "I... I just really want to tell you-"

"They're coming!"

I didn't get to feel any sort of frustration at the fact that I'd been interrupted. Cherrypaw and I stepped away from each other, exchanging a surprised, nervous glance before turning around to look towards the camp clearing.

The first thing that I noticed the three unfamiliar pelts that stood near the camp entrance - Smokefoot, Snowbird, and Oakfur; ShadowClan cats.

I then looked to the warriors den to find Dovewing standing at its entrance. It looked as if she had practically burst out of it just heartbeats ago, and her green eyes were wide and frantic. She appeared to have been the one to speak.

They're coming?

Firestar, who had been standing with the ShadowClan cats, turned to face the younger warrior. "The Dark Forest cats?"

Dovewing quickly nodded her head. "They're in the forest!"

They're in the forest.

I stood, completely frozen as I heard Cherrypaw let out a gasp beside me. "Oh, no..." she breathed, her ginger fur beginning to bristle. "I have to find the other apprentices!"

Just as I finally felt I could move again, I felt Cherrypaw fiercely press herself against me once again. And I looked down at her, meeting her immensely worried, uncertain gaze. "I'll see you later," she then whispered to me.

As I continued to stare down at her, I was so tempted to wrap my tail around her once again, and keep her right beside me throughout the battle that was now arriving.

But, as much as I hated it, I knew that I'd have to let her go for now.

I forced myself to stand up, and I gave Cherrypaw a quick lick on the head, taking in her scent one last time. "You too," I whispered back. I then stepped back so that I could look into her eyes again. "Please be careful. I don't know what I'd do if..."

I quickly trailed off of my words and shook my head, telling myself that now, there was truly no time to waste. I took another step back and nodded my head forward. "Go," I commanded to Cherrypaw. "The others are waiting for you."

For a moment, the ginger she-cat seemed completely torn, but after just a few heartbeats, she began to trot away, flashing me one last affectionate, yet immensely fearful look before pelting off to join the other apprentices.

I watched her go for a few heartbeats before standing up and running over to join my Clanmates, having to push down all of my worried thoughts about the she-cat for the time being.

My feelings had helped me greatly today, but I knew that now, they'd all have to disappear for this battle. It was the only way that I knew I'd be able to get through it.

I'm going to defend my Clanmates, my family, my friends, Cherrypaw... with whatever it takes, I thought, the determination and adrenaline rising up inside of me as I joined my fellow warriors and waited for directions. *Here we go.*

Chapter 31

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"They're in the forest!"

Dovewing's cry immediately made me feel as if the ground had disappeared below me. The fur on my back began to rise. I put more weight on my paws to keep my legs from shaking.

The Dark Forest was here. I didn't know how Dovewing could possibly know that so quickly, but what I did know, was that my fellow warrior would have absolutely no reason to lie. *They're here.* I thought as I forced myself to stand up. *It's time.*

I actually found myself having to catch my own breath at that thought. *It's time.* It all seemed to be happening so fast already; flying by as rapidly as a dream.

I even gave myself a small nick on my shoulder with a single claw in order to make sure that it wasn't one.

It wasn't, just in case you were wondering.

The tension and the distress in the ThunderClan camp seemed to rise as quickly as the largest, most dangerous flood as Firestar and Brambleclaw quickly begun to give directions.

"Sorreltail, Thornclaw and Spiderleg," the ThunderClan deputy called out to the camp clearing, scanning his amber eyes frantically back and forth. "Go as fast as you can to ShadowClan. Fight like they're your own Clanmates."

I followed Brambleclaw's gaze, looking back towards the three cats that he had mentioned. The first cat that caught my eye was my father, Thornclaw. I just barely caught him touching his nose to Lilypetal's, and then to my younger siblings, who were currently

gathered around my mother, before running up to join Spiderleg and Sorreltail.

I then watched from where I stood near a fallen tree as the three of them then made a run for the camp entrance. For a moment, I wondered if my father would brush right past me without even realizing that I was there. So, I sent a quick prayer of thanks to StarClan when he actually swiftly came to a stop, and backed away a couple of pawsteps to stand in front of me.

As soon as I met his pale blue gaze, I had to hold back a whimper, and I dug my head into one of his shoulders, needing to release my fearful thoughts. "Thornclaw..." I breathed as I felt him touch his muzzle to my head. "It's even sooner than I thought." *Much, much sooner!*

I felt a warm tongue gently lap the top of my head. "I know," Thornclaw whispered. He then pulled away and raised an eyebrow, and I met his warm, reassuring gaze. "But I know that you're not going to let that stop you, right?"

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself as I recalled the talk that Thornclaw and I had had just earlier at dusk, one that had truly brought me so much encouragement. And as I was reminded of it again, all of the determination I'd felt then began to resurface. "No. I won't." I replied clearly, and I knew that I meant it. *Letting my fear take over isn't going to get me anywhere at all. Any time that I have, it's only been to my detriment. Any time that I haven't, I've become stronger.*

My nerves and apprehension further beginning to vanish, I then gave my father a quick wink. "That's what a warrior would do, after all!"

Thornclaw's eyes briefly flashed with pride as he gave a slow nod. "Exactly," he meowed, winking back at me and then stepping forward to lick my cheek.

Just a moment later, he backed away, and I watched as he glanced to the side to look over at his patrol, his eyes full of determination. Then, his gaze quickly washed over with anxiety and dread. For a moment, I wondered what he could possibly be looking at, but as

soon as I followed his gaze, and my eyes fell on Lilypetal once again, I knew exactly what my father was thinking.

And what *he* was thinking was probably exactly how I felt too - something as small as the sight of my mother right now made my stomach twist up into a knot.

But before I could express that to Thornclaw, he shook his head quickly and brought his gaze back to me.

"I'll see you soon?" he then asked, and for some reason, his eyebrows raised, and his gaze seemed to be slightly inquiring.

And I immediately wondered if there was a deeper meaning behind my father's words. But unfortunately, I knew that it couldn't be discussed right now. So, I simply touched my muzzle to Thornclaw's cheek and then gave him a nod in farewell. "Count on it."

I then ruthlessly had to push down the fear that threatened to rise in me once again as Thornclaw returned the nod, and then proceeded to pelt out of camp with his group. And I further tried to distract myself by padding deeper into the camp clearing, and I was luckily just in time to hear more of Brambleclaw's directions.

"Whitewing, Berrynose, Goldenshine, Dustystorm and Hazeltail," Brambleclaw was conveniently meowing as soon as I came into earshot. "You must help WindClan."

I barred my teeth at the deputy's words, and I found myself having to hold back a bitter hiss. *WindClan,* I repeated to myself, hating to be reminded of the Clan I had been assigned to fight alongside. *Fabulous. Brambleclaw did a great job with that one.*

I obviously would gladly comply with any assignment that I was given, but... if I'd had the choice, WindClan would certainly not take first.

I despised the fact that the sole reason for that was because Breezepelt was there, but at this point, even being in the same territory as that flea-pelt would disgust me. After the way he'd fought in the battle in the tunnels - trying to kill me *and* my mate,

and likely others too - I knew that I'd never see him in the same way again.

But I had to remind myself that the fact that my former mate being in the camp I was going to be fighting in did not matter, and now was certainly no time to hold a grudge.

I shook my head quickly, almost as if to shake those thoughts away, and frantically began to look around for the cats in my patrol so that we could leave as soon as possible.

As my eyes were able to collect everything that was going on in camp, Foxleap briefly caught my eye as he raced past me, dashing towards the camp entrance with Toadstep, Nightwing and Rosepetal, who I knew were going to be making their way to RiverClan.

I then felt as if my heart had skipped a beat as I then noticed all three of my younger siblings - Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw and Emberpaw - along with Cherrypaw and Molepaw, running up to meet Firestar.

I then managed to feel a twinge of pride as my own apprentice padded up to the front of the group, standing just in front of the ThunderClan leader. "Where should we go first?" the ginger tabby she-cat asked, nothing but eagerness and determination glowing in her amber eyes.

Firestar only took the briefest moment to think about the she-cat's question. "Molepaw and Emberpaw, head for RiverClan. Lightningpaw and Wrenpaw can go to WindClan. And Cherrypaw, go to ShadowClan," he commanded briskly, nodding to each cat as he said their name. "Bring back any news that you can. We need to know where the Dark Forest strikes first."

The ThunderClan leader then turned away from the five younger cats as soon as he had finished speaking, likely set on his mission to make sure that every one of his cats knew exactly what they were doing as soon as possible.

But Poppyfrost and Lilypetal quickly took Firestar's spot, and I

assumed that the two mothers were giving their kits some last encouraging, worry-filled words before they ran off into the forest by themselves. I could hear the distress in their voices from where I stood.

And I had to admit that I was nervous for the apprentices as well, especially Cherrypaw, who Firestar had assigned to go to ShadowClan all by herself.

But I quickly realized that I wasn't the only one.

I looked back towards the Highledge, instantly recognizing the dark gray pelt of my son, who seemed to be staring off at Cherrypaw. And to my surprise, what he was feeling was actually somewhat clear, and he didn't seem nearly as stoic as he typically did.

Well, he was at least showing enough worry for a cat to be able to even recognize that it was worry.

I ran up to meet my son, actually having to hold back a purr. At this point, I had pretty much fully figured out how my son felt about my apprentice. "She'll be fine," I murmured to Swiftflight, brushing my tail against his shoulder.

Swiftflight didn't shift his gaze, but he let out a sigh. "I hope so," he muttered, shaking his head slowly.

I slightly shifted my position so that I was standing directly in front of my son, forcing him to look straight at me. "She will be," I continued to reassure him, but I found that the words were just as comforting to me.

Luckily, Swiftflight didn't look away again once his gaze locked with mine, and I flashed him a half-anxious, half-teasing look. "And I hope I can be certain of that same thing when it comes to you." *There are many things that could happen tonight, and I most certainly don't want losing my son to be one of them...*

Swiftflight stood up, returning the reassuring gaze I'd given him. "You can," he replied evenly, blinking back at me. His gray-blue eyes then briefly seemed to glow with worry. "And you?"

I shrugged back at my son as I was suddenly overwhelmed with affection, and I proceeded to step forward and touch my muzzle to his cheek. "I can be sure," I purred.

I then stepped back once again and gave Swiftflight a quick flick on the ear with my tail. "You know that I love you so much, right?"

"I do," Swiftflight replied, his gaze warm as he nodded. "And I love you too."

I then was too overwhelmed to speak as Swiftflight then lashed his tail to me in farewell and brushed past me, running up to meet Snowstorm, who was standing near the nursery with Brightheart and the kits. *There was a time that I wouldn't even express any sort of love to Swiftflight out loud, knowing fully well that he wouldn't show that he returned it in any way...* I thought, my heart seeming to grow light as I looked over at my son. *Oh, how he has grown.*

But all of that love and affection I was feeling very abruptly disappeared once my eyes fell on the gray and white she-cat next to him, and I felt a chill run down my back. *I'm pretty sure that Snowstorm has realized what tonight could mean for her... what it could mean for Snowflight... she may be able to return to StarClan soon. And surely StarClan wouldn't have sent Snowstorm so many dreams... wouldn't have wanted her prepared so much if she wasn't going to be put in danger to make that happen...*

I then screwed my eyes shut and began to shake my head. *And considering we're pretty sure that Ashfur is involved... that can* only *mean danger.*

I then looked over towards the medicine den where Jayfeather was pulling some brambles across his den entrance. He quickly seemed to sense that my gaze was on him, and he paused in his work for a moment.

And along with that, he seemed to sense all of the worry for Snowstorm that was welling up inside of me. From across the camp, he met my gaze almost as if he could see my own eyes and gave me a single certain, almost reassuring nod as if to say, "If tonight is truly the night, there is nothing we can do. It is out of our paws. We

have done our part. Let it be, Goldenshine."

Let it be, Goldenshine. I then let out a snort of amusement. *Hm, that's never easy for me to do.*

I then had to bring myself back to full focus as a certain sandy-gray pelt caught my eye, and after I blinked a few times, I realized that Dustystorm had run up to meet Whitewing, Berrynose and Hazeltail, who were all waiting by the camp entrance.

I urgently ran up to join them. And as soon as I came face to face with Dustystorm, I found myself stepping forward to dig my head into his neck fur, and I felt a purr beginning to rise in my throat as I felt him protectively rest his head atop mine.

We stayed like that for just a moment before pulling away, and I flashed my mate a challenging, yet amused look as I tilted my head to the side. "Ready to fight some evil spirit cats?"

Dustystorm sniffed and proceeded to puff out his chest. "Oh, I always am!"

As the sandy-gray tom always did, he managed to bring me a bit of joy even in the most trying times, and I actually let out a purr of amusement as the two of us began to follow Whitewing out of the ThunderClan camp.

And just as I was about to crawl through the gorse tunnel, I paused and looked behind me one last time, and saw where Lilypetal was now standing with Squirrelflight and Leafpool near the warriors den.

The determination in my mother's hazel eyes was clear, blazing like a fire devouring an entire forest.

She was ready for what was ahead - whether that meant the arrival of the Dark Forest, or whatever this plan was of hers that I dreaded to see be put into action. I was absolutely terrified for Lilypetal, and I wished I knew more than anything what she was up to. The fact that she couldn't tell Thornclaw, Swiftflight and I the full situation meant that she'd surely be doing something we wouldn't agree with.

And I wished I could say that it was only speculation, but I knew that tonight was bringing my mother some sort of opportunity.

And for a moment, I was so tempted to run up to her and somehow convince her to not go through with whatever it was she was thinking of doing - something I was sure Thornclaw at least wanted to do as well. *Or I could at least be there to help her...*

"Goldenshine, are you coming?"

I faced forward once again at the sound of Dustystorm's voice, and I found him slithering back through the camp entrance to face me. His pale blue eyes were urgent and full of concern. "The others are already in the forest," he then panted.

I shook my head quickly and then gave Dustystorm a sharp nod. "Yes, I am," I answered definitively.

I then proceeded to follow Dustystorm through the camp entrance this time, just as I began to hear battle cries at the top of the stone hollow. "Let's go."

~>~>~>~>~>~>~

I was completely blown away by the sight in front of me.

WindClan had already seemed to be far into their battle once our ThunderClan patrol had arrived, and countless amounts of cats seemed to be in their camp - the fur of the live warriors mingling with the nearly transparent, disheveled pelts of the spirit cats. *The Dark Forest is here, alright. And they most definitely didn't wait on making their presence known...*

And the fact that I was in another Clan's camp with cats that I barely knew was uncomfortable enough, but seeing the Dark Forest cats was enough to make me want to run away; go back to my own camp where I knew I'd feel safer. *But no one probably feels safe or comfortable right now*, I reminded myself. *I just have to deal with it.*

As our patrol ran ahead, determined to join in the battle as soon as possible, I looked to my side at Dustystorm. I couldn't help but wonder if how he was truly feeling, after being a kittypet for over

half of his life with that nasty Chloe. Or how he felt about being in WindClan's camp - the camp that held my former mate who he might have to fight alongside rather than fight with.

But I couldn't ask him about any of it, and the two of us simply exchanged a glance full of love before leaping into the fight at Whitewing's signal.

I pushed down all of my fear, and quite literally leaped into the battle, telling myself that I was fighting with WindClan now. It felt very strange, considering ThunderClan had just fought with them in the tunnels not too long ago.

The only way that I could distinguish between who was living and who was dead was by the Dark Forest cats' faded, wounded and ragged pelts.

I pounced at the first lone one that I saw, trying to remember all of the moves that I had ever been taught since I'd been an apprentice under Sorreltail.

The Dark Forest cat - a mangy-looking light brown tom - acted fast, slashing at my flank and causing me to land on my side.

But I quickly jumped back up to my paws, leaping at the spirit once again. And although he was bigger and stronger than I was, I managed to bowl him over and give him a few deep cuts along his own flank. *Ha!*

I then let out a screech of pain as the spirit then was able to free his front paws. He outstretched them, sunk them into my shoulders, and then managed to roll over so that my back was now the one of the ground.

I struggled under the Dark Forest cat's weight and his tight, painful grip. I tried to push down my own panic, knowing that this cat would not hesitate at all to kill me. Please, StarClan! Not so soon!

I frantically looked to my side from where I lied on the ground, and my eyes immediately fell on a very familiar figure a few fox-lengths away.

And I was completely horrified by the sight. Dustystorm had seemed to have helped Whitewing stand up after one of her fights, and she was now diving back into the battle.

But from where Dustystorm stood, I could clearly see a dark, slim figure creeping up from behind him.

I instantly recognized the vengeful, angry amber eyes. *No... no, no no!*

With that, I suddenly given all of the strength I needed to finish off the cat that was on top of me. With an enraged hiss, I managed to let one of my forelegs free, and I was able to slash across the tom's throat. He let out a blood-curdling screech before falling to his side.

I then stood up, terrified and shocked as I watched it slowly fade away and then completely disappear. A shiver then ran down my back, and I felt my fur beginning to bristle as I realized that this was probably the equivalent of killing. *The second cat in my entire life that I've ever killed...* I realized. *And unfortunately, there will probably be more to come.*

I then whipped my gaze back towards Dustystorm just in time to see Breezepelt leaping towards him, letting out a battle cry. And it only took me a moment to realize that my former mate wasn't showing Dustystorm any mercy. He landed on my mate's back, and without any hesitation, began to sink his teeth into Dustystorm's neck.

I ran towards the two fighting cats as quickly as I could. "No!" I cried out as I pelted towards them. "Breezepelt, get away from him!"

Then, without hesitation, I leaped straight at the two of them, and as soon as my claws met Breezepelt's fur, his grip on Dustystorm was ripped away.

While Breezepelt was taken by surprise, I managed to pin him down, and I sunk my claws into deep into his shoulders to make sure that he would stay there.

I then shot Dustystorm, who was getting back up on his paws a

couple of tail-lengths away, a warning, urging look - trying to tell him that I had this covered. And luckily, after a moment's hesitation, my mate complied, and he leaped back into the battle.

I watched him go for just a moment, and then whipped my head back to look down at Breezepelt. "After what happened in the tunnels, I'm not letting you lay even one claw on him!" I hissed at the WindClan tom.

"Oh, please! I'm sure that I'm only doing you a favor," Breezepelt growled back at me. "The Clan doesn't need soft housecats like him."

He then let out a purr of amusement, and although it was something meant to express an emotion of joy, it further showed just how emotion*less* that Breezepelt was. "You should be humiliated! He's no warrior."

I let out another hiss, sinking my claws even deeper into Breezepelt's shoulders. "He's more of a warrior then you'll ever be!" I growled back to him through gritted teeth.

Then, with those words, Breezepelt let out another enraged hiss and then proceeded to kick me off of him with his hind legs. I flew backwards, and the breath was knocked out of me as my back landed flat on the ground. But just before Breezepelt could even try to leap at me, I caught my breath and dodged his advances.

But clearly - that hadn't discouraged the WindClan warrior at all. I found myself having to dodge many of Breezepelt's swipes and leaps, all with claws fully out.

Just as he had with Dustystorm - Breezepelt clearly wasn't showing any mercy, and he only had one goal, one end result that he hoped for in this fight - one that wouldn't go in my favor.

And as I came to realize this, and the fact that he obviously wasn't fighting on the side of the Clans, I finally found myself beginning to understand this drastic change that I had witnessed in my former mate over the past few moons - why he'd been so hostile to me that one day at the WindClan border, and why he'd become so much

more of an aggressive, vengeful tom.

After all, I'd seen it all before in another cat.

I slashed at Breezepelt's muzzle from where he now had me pinned down, and as he looked away and let out a pained hiss, I rolled over on my side and managed to pin him down.

I forced myself to meet his blazing amber gaze. "You trained there too, didn't you?" I growled down at him.

To my relief, Breezepelt seemed to be struggling a bit under my grip. "What?"

I narrowed my eyes and lowered my head so that my face was almost nose to nose with his. "You trained in the Dark Forest too," I muttered, my teeth barred. "*Didn't you?*"

Breezepelt attempted to swipe his own paw at my muzzle, but he missed. "So what if I did?" he hissed back at me.

I let out a gasp, hating that my premonitions had been true. "Great StarClan, I should have known!" I exclaimed, looking up to the star-flitted sky. "How could I have been so oblivious... *again?*"

"What do you mean?"

"You've fallen into the same trap that Swiftflight did. That *our son* did, Breezepelt!" I explained to him angrily.

I then let out another hiss as another realization crossed my mind. "And you *knew* that, didn't you?" I pressed to my former mate. "You knew that Swiftflight was training there when I came to speak with you at the WindClan border."

Breezepelt once again tried to swipe at my face to no avail. "And so what?"

I put more of my weight on the tom and sunk my claws even deeper into his fur. I was shaking my head slowly out of amazement as things became even clearer. "My goodness, I should've known all of those moons ago," I nearly whispered. "No wonder you lashed out at

me. Felt like it was a personal attack, didn't you? Well, I suppose that Swiftflight was becoming quite similar to you. But unlike you, he was able to find his way out of all of it!"

"Found his way out?" Breezepelt repeated disbelievingly, almost sounding amused as he continued to struggle beneath me. "He ran away from that Ashfur like a piece of prey about to be pounced on."

I avoided yet another swipe. "You're right - we're not alike," Breezepelt went on, his amber eyes completely dark and emotionless. "He's a coward, and I'm not. I stayed and learned how to fight for what I believe in."

I almost thought that I was going to crumble into countless amount of pieces out of my anger and shock at Breezepelt's words - ones that were being said against his *own son*.

A sheer amount of protectiveness for Swiftflight rose inside of me. "Our son? A coward?" I pressed to him, my voice shaking out of my rage. "Out of the two of you, he's definitely not the coward."

I then lashed my tail towards the battle. "And what fight could you possibly choose over fighting for your Clanmates?"

I then let out a pained screech as Breezepelt finally managed to slash his claws across my face. "Like I'd waste my time telling you!" he hissed back at me.

I quickly leaped off of the tom and ran my claws down his flank while I had the chance. "Then don't bother!" I barked at him before beginning to pelt away from him, realizing that this fight wasn't in the least bit worth it. "I can't believe I ever called you my kit's father!"

I then stood in my place, slowing waiting for my anger to simmer down as I watched Breezepelt run away, and then disappear into the forest without looking back even once.

I shook my head slowly as I stared back at the place the black tom had disappeared. *Good freaking riddance.*

I then turned back towards the camp clearing, and was surprised to

see that there didn't seem to be one faded pelt in sight, and the Dark Forest cats all seemed to be gone.

In fact, there weren't many live warriors in sight, either. I looked even further ahead to see that the WindClan warriors were beginning to pelt through their camp entrance and into the forest.

I frantically looked around for my own Clanmates, and was relieved to find them just a little ways away from where the WindClan cats were making their exits. I trotted up to them as I tried to catch my breath.

Dustystorm's eyes seemed to flash with consolation as they fell on me. "We're heading back to ThunderClan now," my mate told me once I'd made my way to our patrol. "The Dark Forest cats have been cleared out of here."

I slowly nodded back at Dustystorm as I continued to pant. "Great," I breathed, shaking out my fur. "That's great."

I then met Dustystorm's gaze again to see that it was full of concern. "Are you okay?" my mate whispered, briefly nodding back to the place that I'd just been having a full-on argument with my former mate in.

And as much as I understood Dustystorm's worry, that confrontation had done nothing but make me feel better losing that cat that I'd once thought meant so much to me. Nothing - not even having his friendship or being Swiftflight's father figure - was worth it. I'd thought for many, many moons now that I didn't need him, but now I completely knew.

I took a deep breath and flashed Dustystorm a reassuring, certain look. "I'm fantastic," I breathed, pressing myself close to him. "Let's get back home."

Then, almost as if our patrol had been given a signal, we all simultaneously got to our paws and left the WindClan camp without another word.

We quickly found ourselves at the stream that marked the border

with ThunderClan, either trudging as swiftly as we could through the water, or risking leaping across.

And once we were in our own territory once again, we all sprinted like we never had before, the sounds of battle getting louder and louder with each pawstep we took. I let myself be briefly comforted by the wind that brushed my fur back, and the soft grass that touched my pads whenever they landed on the ground.

But my travel abruptly came to a stop as I myself came to a halt, a flash of gray typically not being something I'd see in the forest.

And no, it wasn't a rock.

I wish it was a rock.

But no, it was Ashfur - the horrible, sick, fox-hearted gray-speckled tom himself, looking just as alive as I was.

He was alone, and I obviously wondered why.

But it only took a moment's thought for a single possibility to cross into my mind, and I suddenly felt the same overwhelming feelings of fear I'd experienced as soon as I'd heard of the Dark Forest's arrival. *Oh, no...*

But before I could even do something as little as take another pawstep forward, Dustystorm came into my sight again. He urgently ran up to stand at my side. "Goldenshine? Are you okay? You're falling behind."

My mate clearly hadn't noticed what I was seeing, and I wasn't sure if I wanted him to. *No way am I going to risk Dustystorm being hurt by another heartless cat with a grudge on me.*

I shook my head quickly. "Don't worry. I-I'm fine," I stammered as I prompted Dustystorm forward with my tail. And before he could press any more, I ran ahead of him urgently, my heart pounding with complete terror of what I knew was coming.

Chapter 32

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Well, one Dark Forest patrol has already thought better of messing with the likes of us... I thought, still concentrated on trying to catch my breath after the exhausting skirmish that had ended only moments earlier. *It's great... yet I'm having a lot of trouble seeing it as a victory. We're nowhere close to being finished yet...*

I then took a deep breath, shifting my gaze to look out into the forest above. *...and neither am I.*

The first wave of the Dark Forest cats had swarmed in just as the ThunderClan patrols had dispersed and left for their assigned Clans. It was clear that these Dark Forest cats had come with a mission - leaping into our camp, claws outstretched without a moment's hesitation, and pouncing at the first cats that they saw.

Dens seemed to be shredded within heartbeats, and my heart had sunk having to see so much blood and cats being sent to the medicine den in such a short amount of time.

And although the wave had been trying and brutal, it had been quick, and the Dark Forest spirits had seemed to disappear and flee as quickly as they had made their appearance.

But despite the grueling fight that had already taken place, I found that two good things had come out of its aftermath - no cat had been gravely injured, for one. Most wounds had already been tended to, Jayfeather and Leafpool being the legendary cats that they were.

And secondly, amidst all of the Dark Forest cats I had seen, there was a certain cat that hadn't been among them. *And it had better stay that way until I'm able to slip out...*

I then let out a sigh as I quickly padded over to the nursery – one of the many stops I was making in my circulation around the camp. *But now is not the time to do that*, I told myself, ignoring a certain tug of urgency that I'd been feeling as soon as I'd found out the Dark Forest cats were in the forest. *I will be able to see...* things *through very soon, but I want to stand by my Clanmates for as long as I possibly can tonight.*

I then crawled through the den's entrance... or rather, what was left of it. *This plan is in no way a selfish action... but I'd sure be making it one if I didn't fight alongside my friends at all before making my escape,* I thought. *Soon, Lilypetal. Soon, but not now. He'll wait for you. You've made sure of that.* "Hi, there!" I tried to purr cheerfully to Brightheart, who currently had her ginger and white tail wrapped around all five of ThunderClan's kits.

Brightheart returned the greeting, her blue eyes glowing with warmth. "Hi, Lilypetal," the she-cat meowed. She then let out a sigh. "Great StarClan, you're definitely a sight for sore eyes!"

I purred with amusement as I settled down in front of her, giving each kit a little nuzzle on the head with my tail. "Really? I'd think the wounds would be a bit unsettling," I joked, nodding to the large gash on my flank that had only just stopped bleeding. And after Brightheart and I shared another laugh, I flashed her a look of concern. "Is everything alright in here? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

Brightheart immediately shook her head. "We're okay as we can be, Lilypetal. Thank you," Brightheart breathed, her blue eyes revealing worry and wariness despite her words. She then returned a look of concern, giving me a nod. "Are you-"

"Wait!" I then couldn't help but purr with amusement as two tiny gray-and-white paws began to prod at Brightheart's flank, and Brightheart and I both shifted our gazes to see Lilykit looking eagerly up at the queen. "I need something! Can I ask Lilypetal about it?"

"That depends on what it is," the she-cat purred as she exchanged a humored glance with me. "Lilypetal?"

I shrugged back at Brightheart, taking a step forward and nodding to Lilykit. "Ask away, Lilykit!" I purred. "What's going on?"

Lilykit eagerly began to knead her little paws into the ground as she looked hopefully up at me. "Can you teach me a couple of fighting moves?" she mewed. "Please, just a couple? Then I can come with you and help you fight the Dark Forest cats!"

I exchanged yet another amused glance with Brightheart before bending down to lick Lilykit's small head. "Aw, I wish that I could," I meowed softly to her. "But you're much too busy already!"

I pulled away from Lilykit to see her staring up at me, her head tilted to the side. "What do you mean?"

"You're in here to protect Brightheart, aren't you?" I inquired to Lilykit with wide-eyes, lashing my tail towards the queen. "You can't leave. She needs you!"

Just as I had hoped, Lilykit's eyes immediately lightened up. "Yeah!" she squealed. "That's exactly what I'm doing!"

I then heard a sigh of relief, and when I looked up to meet Brightheart's gaze, I held back another *mrrow* of laughter as she seemed to mouth a "thank you" to me. I flashed her a warm, affectionate look before nodding back to Lilykit. "And I know that you're going to do it so well," I purred to her.

I then couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement as I recalled the promise that Firestar had made me just a couple of moons before. "And hey, maybe sometime soon, I will be able to teach-"

A yowl from the camp clearing interrupted my words. "Someone's coming!" I immediately recognized Dovewing's voice. "They're injured!"

"Oh, dear," I muttered. I flicked my ears, looking back at Brightheart and the kits from where I'd been looking outside. "I'd better see what's going on."

Suddenly having to push down a bit of panic, I then began to briskly make my way out of the nursery. "Bye, you all!" I called

back.

I heard Lilykit's reply no less than a heartbeat later. "Bye, Lilypetal!"

I looked back towards the nursery one last time, giving Sorreltail and Brackenfur's kit one last warm look. *Lilykit has so much spirit, and she seems so sweet,* I thought as crawled through the nursery's entrance once again. *And I might receive her as an apprentice in a few short moons!*

I then couldn't help but let out a snort. *Ha, imagine - Lilypetal training another Lilypaw! ThunderClan would sure have a lot of fun with that.*

Gasps of horror and alarm broke into my thoughts, prompting me to run across the camp and join the group of cats gathered near the Highledge. I stood by Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight as I stared off at the camp entrance, nervously anticipating what Dovewing somehow already knew.

And just a few heartbeats later, I hated to see that the younger she-cat's premonitions had been right when Ivypool and Tigerheart of ShadowClan made their way through the brambles, the limp body of Hollyleaf in their jaws.

I had barely realized that my mouth had dropped open. "Oh my goodness..." I breathed almost inaudibly. I already found myself forcing back emotion, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to even bear looking to my side at Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw, who had been seen as the fluffy black she-cat's parents for so long.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dovewing running up to meet Tigerheart and Ivypool. "Jayfeather! Leafpool!" she then called out, looking back towards the medicine den.

I then simply watched, my legs beginning to shake as Firestar joined the three cats, taking on Hollyleaf's weight as Ivypool took a step back. Dovewing seemed to be speaking frantically to Ivypool, her green eyes wide with horror as Firestar and Tigerheart then gently tried to lay Hollyleaf on the ground.

I felt physically sick, and I actually had to close my eyes for a moment. *With this battle, I knew that at least some cats would be injured, or worse... yet it's still just as painful to see. Oh, Hollyleaf...*

My gaze then shifted back towards the camp entrance as I noticed the tortoiseshell pelt of Poppyfrost quickly trotting up to Ivypool. "Have you seen Cherrypaw?" the she-cat asked worriedly, her blue eyes wide. "Or Molepaw?"

Ivypool shrugged back at the older she-cat. "No. They could be anywhere."

"What about Emberpaw, Lightningpaw or Wrenpaw?" I pressed to the silver-and-white she-cat, Poppyfrost's question sparking my own worry towards my three kits. When I hadn't been helping to repair dens, checking in on my Clanmates, or... you know, battling evil spirit cats, my mind had been consumed with panicked thoughts of my family, and the thought of my three younger kits running around the lake territories by themselves had been driving me *crazy*. *And what if they were to be found by...?*

I then closed my eyes, not being able to handle that thought for a single moment. *Great StarClan, I need to leave soon. Really soon.*

I was then immensely disappointed to see Ivypool shrug and shake her head once again. "I haven't seen any of them. I'm sorry."

Just as I was about to probe Ivypool even more, I had to step to the side as Swiftflight stepped between Poppyfrost and me. "What?" the younger tom exclaimed, his gray-blue eyes dark and full of concern as he stared back at Ivypool. "You didn't pass Cherrypaw on your way back?"

He then let out a huff, shaking his head quickly before meeting the she-cat's gaze again. "You didn't pass them on your way back?"

"No, I didn't," Ivypool answered once again, her meow a bit sharper this time.

With that, I was surprised to see Swiftflight let out a distressed sigh and close his eyes. Before I could even ask if he was alright, he then

whipped himself around, beginning to pace the area, as if Ivypool's words had made him incredibly uneasy.

Beside me, Poppyfrost seemed to be staring off at the dark gray tom, following his movements. For some reason, her blue eyes seemed to be glowing with satisfaction and ease. *I wonder what could possibly be easing about Swiftflight's anxiety for his Clanmates?* I joked to myself.

But my curious, lighthearted thoughts then vanished as Leafpool came into my sight, pelting across the camp from the medicine den, and I actually thought that I could hear the crack of my own heart breaking as the light brown tabby she-cat crouched down beside her daughter and began to lap at her cheek.

It was all already too much for my soul to handle, but nevertheless, I slowly padded up to stand just behind Leafpool, gently running my tail down her flank, hoping the gesture would bring her at least some comfort.

"Save her!" Ivypool was yowling to Jayfeather once I had come into earshot. "You have to save her! Hawkfrost tried to kill me, but Hollyleaf chased him away."

I heard Brambleclaw let out a hiss from just behind me. "Hawkfrost?" the dark brown tabby repeated, his fur beginning to bristle.

Swiftflight, who was doing his pacing just a couple of tail-lengths away, stopped in his tracks at the Dark Forest cat's name being spoken. "*Hawkfrost* did this?" my kin then asked, running up to stand next to Ivypool. His eyes were full of concern for his friend, but anger at what one of his former mentors had done clearly glowed there as well.

Ivypool closed her eyes and gave a slow nod. "I was fighting Snowtuft and Thistleclaw. I couldn't help her."

Dovewing put the tip of her tail on her sister's shoulder. "You carried her home," she meowed softly. "You couldn't have done more."

"Hollyleaf?!"

I, along with many other cats, whipped our heads back towards the camp entrance at the new voice. I couldn't help but feel immensely relieved to see one of my older daughters, Goldenshine, standing there with Dustystorm, Berrynose, Whitewing and Hazeltail just behind her.

The golden brown tabby she-cat scrambled across the camp. She had a nasty scratch on one of her sides, and one of her cheeks was bleeding, but she didn't seem to care in this moment. She ran up to meet me, and her gray eyes were wide with horror. "What happened?" she nearly whimpered, and my heart seemed to sink all over again just looking at my daughter's face.

I wrapped my tail around her, pulled her closer to me, and gave her a gentle lick on the head. "The battle happened..." I whispered softly. I then looked down at Goldenshine so that I could meet her gaze. "Hollyleaf sacrificed her own life to save Ivypool."

"Sacrificed her life? No!" Goldenshine nearly whimpered as she backed away from me, turning to look back at her friend. "No, you can't say that yet!" She then looked helplessly towards Jayfeather, and although the gray tabby tom was deep in concentration trying to help his sister, the look in his eyes made it clear of what was going to happen.

Goldenshine then let her head hang low. "No..." she then breathed, screwing her eyes shut. Just as I had done with Leafpool, I tried to sooth my daughter by stroking her flank with my tail, knowing that she was about to lose one of her oldest, closest friends. I then exchanged a dismayed glance with Dustystorm, who had walked up to sit next to his mate.

"Firestar," Dovewing then murmured, padding up to stand next to the ginger tom. "They've reached the woods."

My ears pricked with alarm, and I felt my heart nearly skip a beat, because I knew very well who *"they've"* meant.

But my fear was quickly replaced with sorrow all over again when I

heard Leafpool's almost voiceless whisper. "Hollyleaf," she meowed softly, touching her nose to her daughter's cheek. I then saw her amber eyes briefly flash with alarm. "Hollyleaf?"

Her next words nearly made me topple over. "She's not breathing!"

No! No, no, no!

"She's lost too much blood," Jayfeather then murmured gently. "We couldn't have saved her."

I took a deep breath, trying to fight my own sadness as I let my tail drape across Leafpool's shoulders. *I know exactly what she's going through,* I thought, having to blink back emotion once again as I looked back at Hollyleaf's barely-moving figure, almost thinking that I could see Snowflight's white pelt lying there instead. *The pain of it felt like a physical wound. It felt worse than that.*

I then crouched down so that I was lying just beside her. *But the support of my friends and family is what got me through it.* "Oh, Leafpool, I am so, so sorry," I whispered to her. "I-"

I then cut myself off and stood up, whipping my head back to look at the entrance of brambles and gorse as the sounds of determined, fast pawsteps sounded from outside of the hollow.

I instinctively ran up to stand next to Goldenshine as my heart began to race. *Well... there's the "they've"...*

Behind me, I could see the rest of my Clanmates scrambling to get into position, and I could hear Firestar's yowl, "Prepare for attack!"

Beside me, I could feel my daughter's fur beginning to bristle, and she seemed to be casting my anxious sidelong glances. "Lilypetal?" she managed to murmur above all of the chaos ensuing.

"Yes, Goldenshine?" I replied to her, and I instantly felt an overwhelming amount of concern as I met her frightened gaze. For some reason, my motherly instincts told me that it was something beyond the Dark Forest patrol's entry, or the loss of her friend. "What's the matter?"

I began to twitch my tail nervously back and forth as Goldenshine looked away from me, hesitating, and the pawsteps of many cats were getting louder and faster. "I need to tell you something."

She then turned to face me, revealing her more hardened, determined gray gaze. "Listen, mother, I saw-"

A loud, violent rustle then came from the camp entrance. Goldenshine abruptly cut off her own words, and the both of us quickly turned towards the sound.

Birchfall and Blossomfall had burst into the camp clearing. They were both struggling to catch their breaths, and their fur was bristled out to make them look double their size. For some reason, Firestar was staring back at the two of them, his green eyes blazing with anger. As curious as I had been to hear what my daughter was about to ask me, now was certainly not the time

"How could you betray us?" the ThunderClan leader growled at his Clanmates.

"I thought you'd choose to fight on our side!" Dovewing then called out to them, more specifically towards her father.

I held back a gasp as I exchanged a shocked glance with Goldenshine. *Birchfall and Blossomfall? Traitors?*

"He did!" Ivypool then insisted, running up to stand next to her father. "He fought with me at the WindClan camp."

Birchfall nodding in response to his daughter's words. "We would never betray ThunderClan!"

I heard Goldenshine let out a gasp beside me as Mousewhisker then ran into sight. "We came to warn you!"

"We saw the Dark Forest patrol!" Blossomfall then meowed urgently, her blue eyes wide with urgency as she scanned them around the clearing. "They're coming!"

I then felt the slowest, coldest-feeling chill run down my spine as just heartbeat later, another figure crashed through the thorns of

the camp entrance - a huge gray-and-white tom, his amber eyes filled with nothing but malice.

I instinctively stepped in front of Goldenshine as the Dark Forest warrior began to speak, his dark gaze locked on Birchfall. "We lost the WindClan camp thanks to you!" he roared back at him. "I'll save killing you till last."

Birchfall stared back at the faded warrior, his pale tabby fur beginning to bristle all over again. "Not if I kill you first, Thistleclaw! You tricked us!"

Then, almost as if Birchfall's words had been some sort of signal, many cats then burst into the camp, quickly turning the woven brambles to pieces.

I narrowed my eyes, concentrating as much as I could as I rapidly scanned my gaze around the clearing that was now overflowing with the Dark Forest spirits.

I was able to let out a relieved huff only after a couple moments of searching.

I then frantically looked beside me, hoping to ask Goldenshine what she had been about to say to me, or at least to wish her luck and say goodbye, but she was far behind me now, assisting Leafpool and Jayfeather in getting Hollyleaf's body out of the way.

Unfortunately, I knew that I didn't have the time to chase Goldenshine down, as much as I desperately wanted to.

So, I took a deep breath, bracing myself for even more bloodshed and strife. *And may StarClan light my path.*

Then, not letting myself hesitate for one more moment, I leapt into the battle, whipping my head around to search for a Clanmate that needed assistance, or a lone Dark Forest cat that maybe needed to be taught a lesson.

And just within moments, a white, scrawny-looking tom caught my eye just a few fox-lengths away from me. So, I went into a low crouch and slowly began to creep towards him.

Once I felt the time was right, I pushed off of my back legs and leaped forward, ready to sink my claws into one of the many cats who had taken so much time to get here for the sole purpose of vengeance.

But just as my front claws had been about to brush white fur, I let out a yelp of alarm as I was bowled over by a large, dark figure that nearly knocked the breath out of me.

I had been too taken by surprise to react on time, and this new cat was easily able to pin me to the ground. For a moment, I felt so dazed that I could barely tell who it was for a moment.

But once everything in my sight sharpened again, I let out a growl as I quickly realized who the cat was on top of me. I'd never met him, and I'd never known him, but with all of the stories I'd heard, I suppose I might as well have.

I immediately recognized the dark gray tabby pelt of Darkstripe - Tigerstar's most loyal follower, and one of ThunderClan's biggest cowards. "Oh no, you don't!" he hissed at me, his large claws sinking into my shoulders, and his yellow eyes blazing with malevolence. "I get to take you on first!"

I managed to get one of my forelegs free, and proceeded to slash Darkstripe across the muzzle and knock him backwards with my hind paws.

I quickly stood up. "What, are you all taking turns?" I hissed mockingly.

Darkstripe struggled back up onto his paws, the ominous look in his eyes not having changed even a little bit. "Well, I know that at least some of us are eager to see how Scourge's daughter fights!"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes in annoyance at those words. "My goodness, is this just known information in the Dark Forest?" *Tigerstar and Ashfur seemed to associate me with it, and that was weird enough!*

I then crouched down, letting my claws slide out of their sheathes

once again. "You should be eager to fight me because I'm a force to be reckoned with," I demanded to Darkstripe.

I then had to hold back a smug smirk as I cocked one of my eyebrows. "Not because I'm the daughter of some cat that managed to trick your fearless leader!"

I then blinked, baffled for a single moment. *Did I just speak well of my father?*

As I had hoped, Darkstripe seemed completely taken aback by my words. But after a moment, he shook his head and let out a contemptuous snort. "A force to be reckoned with?" he mocked.

My eyes slowly narrowed down into slits. "Well, someone's expectations of Scourge's daughter are fairly low..." I murmured in response to the tom's condescending tone.

"Well, what else am I supposed to think?" Darkstripe then meowed, seeming to have full confidence in his words again as he began to circle me. "Am I supposed to be intimidated by a little she-cat named Lilypetal - a kittypet that stumbled into the Clans by accident?"

I was filled with nothing but grit and determination as I then leaped forward at Darkstripe. The dark gray tabby was taken by surprise, and I managed to pin him down onto his side, pressing his head to the earth with one of my paws. "Yes, you are," I replied in a mockingly cheerful tone. "And I like the name Lilypetal, actually..." I then bent my head down to hiss into the tom's ear. "It gives a false sense of softness."

Beneath my grip, Darkstripe then let out an enraged growl, using all of his strength to roll over. This caused me to lose my balance, giving the Dark Forest warrior the perfect opportunity to swipe at me.

I felt his claws dig into my left shoulder, and I couldn't help but let out a yowl of pain. *Holy hedgehogs in a dung heap, that hurt!*

Bu thank StarClan, the worst of the pain was only brief, and I

managed to dodge a second swipe and swerve around Darkstripe, clamping my jaws around his tail and yanking him back with all of the force that I could.

Then, as Darkstripe was then thrown off of balance, I crouched down and slide under him, swiftly getting back up onto my paws so that I could leap straight at him, claws outstretched.

I dove straight for the dark gray tabby's flank. But unfortunately, my weight hadn't been enough this time to completely push him over. Instead, Darkstripe was able to make a deep cut straight along my side, and I felt the pain strengthening as he ran his claws further up my flank.

Then, I came crashing to the ground, letting out a loud hiss through gritted teeth as the tom's claws ended right at the same shoulder wound he'd caused just moments earlier.

Not being able to fight the pain this time, I fell onto my side. I panted, my teeth still barred as I tried to stand up, but my shoulder - my entire left side - was practically useless to me for the moment.

But I couldn't let that stop me. *No, not now! Not so soon, please StarClan!* I pleaded to my ancestors as I continued in my attempts to get up to my paws. *Please! I need to be able to-*

I then felt my heart drop onto the ground with me as Darkstripe's large, muscular figure stepped forward to tower over me, his yellow eyes still blazing with malice. He let out the most ominous, bone-chilling purr of amusement as he looked down at me. "Well, how shocking is this?" he meowed scornfully, beginning to lift a single unsheathed claw in the air. "I've been proven right."

No...

I had never felt so helpless in my entire life. Even all of the adrenaline and determination rushing through me wasn't enough to save me, and I knew that. But I also knew that if I had just a few heartbeats worth of time, the pain would fade enough to where I'd be able to stand up.

But all I could do for the moment was tense up and cringe back as I stared up at Darkstripe's large, unsheathed claw. *StarClan, please let him do a really, really slow swipe!*

Darkstripe's paw then began to slam down. *No!*

Then, just as Darkstripe's claws had barely brushed against my neck fur, I felt his entire weight being completely lifted from my body in a matter of moments. I rolled over to see a flash of ginger blow past me, and Darkstripe's figure disappear from above me.

I then rolled over to my side, and gasped with surprise at what I saw in front in front of me.

Squirrelflight currently had Darkstripe pinned down, and he seemed to be struggling beneath her grip. My Clanmate's eyes were blazing with anger as she stared down at the Dark forest warrior. "What have you proven?" she growled at him. "That you're a heartless cat that would shred someone to pieces just to make themselves feel better about their failures?"

I then watched, my eyes widening as Squirrelflight raked her claws across Darkstripe's flank, swiped them across his muzzle, and then backed off of him, her green eyes dark as she watched him run off into the cluster of fighting cats. "Yeah, that's right!" she called out to him. "Run away!"

She then whipped her gaze over to me, her eyes flashing with worry and urgency as she ran up to me. "Because that's something else that he's proven many times - he's one of the biggest cowards that the Clans have ever known."

The dark ginger she-cat then bent down, lifting me up by the scruff to help me stand up. Once I'd gotten onto all four of my paws, she took my weight as I leaned into her. "And to pick on your name as a weakness?" she then muttered. "Please."

I managed to let out a weak purr of amusement as Squirrelflight led me away from the battle. "Definitely not his proudest moment, I'm sure," I breathed as Squirrelflight then gently helped me to lie back down on the ground.

I then couldn't suppress another pained hiss as weight was put on my injured side. *And honestly... not mine, either.* "Oh, goodness..." I muttered tautly, screwing my eyes shut as I fought through the pain.

Squirrelflight's green eyes widened as she looked down at me. "Oh, Lilypetal! Are you okay?" she asked me worriedly, her eyes beginning to scan over my wounds. "Do you need me to bring you to Leafpool and Jayfeather?"

By the blessing of StarClan, I finally was able to stand up, nearly pain-free. I even managed to give my fur a good shake. "That is completely alright, Squirrelflight. You've done more than enough already," I reassured my friend, giving her a quick lick on the ear. "Thank you so much for your help back there."

"Of course," Squirrelflight replied. Her green eyes then seemed to glow with affection and amusement as she gave me a light nudge. "I mean, I had to. If Darkstripe had been able to finish you off, who would I gossip with in the warriors den?"

If Darkstripe had been able to finish me off, then my entire plan would have gone to nothing, I realized, a slight shiver running down my spine. *What would I do then? How would I be able to keep my family safe...* everyone *safe?*

Despite my frantic, worried thoughts, I tried to purr with amusement and leaned on Squirrelflight's shoulder - half as a gesture of affection, and partly because I was still *exhausted* by my fight with Darkstripe.

After a moment, I then stepped back from the dark ginger she-cat, noticing that she seemed to be staring off at the battling cats, her green eyes flitting all over the area. "He isn't here..." I then heard her mutter, her eyes narrowing down into slits.

For a heartbeat, I was genuinely oblivious as to who she was talking about. "Who is?"

My heart then nearly skipped a beat, almost instantly understanding. "Oh..." *You're right, my friend - he's not here,* I

thought, my heart beginning to pound faster. *But I really, really wish that you hadn't been looking for him in the first place.*

"Yeah..." Squirrelflight breathed in response to my words, then letting out a snort and standing up. "Well, I'm not surprised that he's too ashamed to show his face in this Clan. He should be."

I then watched, my fear and discomfort beginning to rise as Squirrelflight slowly unsheathed her claws. "But I have to admit, I'd love to give that gray-speckled tom a scratch or two to remember..."

I slowly shut my eyes, continuing to try and push down panic. "That won't be necessary, Squirrelflight."

I wasn't surprised at all when Squirrelflight looked completely taken aback by my words. "What are you talking about, Lilypetal?" she demanded to me. "After all that he's done to my family, after all that he's done to you... it's *more* than necessary!"

I stood up, forcing myself to look straight at the ginger she-cat. "I don't mean that it isn't necessary to give Ashfur a taste of his own medicine, because I definitely agree with you on that front," I tried to meow to her evenly, preparing for Squirrelflight to think that I sounded crazy. "I'm saying that it isn't necessary for *you* to be the one to do it."

And sure enough, the look in her eye definitely made it seem like she was thinking that way. "But I must be!" she insisted to me. "I'm the one that Ashfur's most angry with, you know that!"

She then cut off what she had been about to say next, and her eyes slowly began to widen as she looked down at her paws. "Well, no one else except..." She then lifted her head back up, her gaze seeming to flash with understanding. "Oh, Lilypetal..." she then whispered, shaking her head slowly.

I shut my eyes again for a moment. "What?"

"Please don't tell me that this has to do with the 'taking care of it' that you told me about not too long ago," Squirrelflight then murmured, taking a step closer to me. Her voice had been calm, but

I could tell that she had been trying to keep it from shaking.

I was trying to keep *myself* from shaking. "...and if it does?"

Squirrelflight let out another snort, giving a single lash of her tail. "If it does, then I'm going to tell you that I'm certainly not letting you do what I think you are!"

The more that Squirrelflight seemed to be finding out, the faster that my heart seemed to pound. Not only was Squirrelflight one of the *last* cats, if not *the* last cat that should know of what I was planning with Ashfur, but discussing it out loud with any cat - so soon to when it would actually happen - made it feel more real and terrifying. "What do you think I'm going to do?" I then asked my friend.

Squirrelflight didn't reply for a moment, and simply stared back at me through narrowed eyes. Now, I could be completely sure that she was seeing through every vague answer I was giving her. "Well... first off, I'm going to go ahead and guess that his location isn't something that's a mystery to you."

When I hesitated, Squirrelflight let out a small grunt and nodded. "I thought not," she muttered, her gaze now full of discernment and determination. "All the more reason why I'm going with you - wherever this is."

With those words, my panic and urgency to keep Squirrelflight *away* from the pre-planned location spiked up again. "But, Squirrelflight-"

"No, Lilypetal!" my friend growled back at me, her harsh green eyes then softening just a bit. "I'm not letting my best friend endure this alone."

"I know, and that's why you're *my* best friend," I whispered, putting the tip of my tail on her shoulder as my heart welled up with affection. "But you can't come with me, Squirrelflight." *You really, really can't - almost more than anyone else who has insisted on the same...*

Squirrelflight still wasn't convinced by my words, to my dismay. "Why not? I want to help you," she insisted to me. "And with this situation specifically - after all Ashfur and I have been through - I *need* to help you."

I closed my eyes yet again, taking a deep breath before speaking. "You want to help me, Squirrelflight?"

The dark ginger she-cat looked as if she was about to explode with desperation. "Yes!" she exclaimed, her eyes frantic.

I stood up. "Okay," I meowed evenly, "then you'll stay here, and you'll stay as far away from Ashfur as possible."

Squirrelflight snorted, her fur beginning to bristle. "Wow, that sure sounds like help!"

"You have no idea," I insisted to Squirrelflight, running my tail down her flank to try and calm her down. I then gave her a single certain nod once I had her gaze. "Trust me, Squirrelflight. Please."

For a moment, I thought that the ginger she-cat was going to protest yet again, so I felt an immense amount relief when she seemed to give in, letting out a sigh. "Okay," she breathed.

She then took a glance back towards the battle, and her eyes seemed to flash with panic before they returned to me. "You'd better not be tricking me just to try and protect me."

I shook my head back at the she-cat, actually managing to let out another purr of amusement. "Of course not," I reassured her - my words all being completely truthful.

I then sniffed as I turned away from the she-cat, looking out towards the forest for a heartbeat. *You're not the cat that I'm trying to deceive tonight.*

Squirrelflight then simply flashed me one last wary, yet slightly warm look before padding ahead to leap back into the battle.

I took a few pawsteps forward, about to follow her, but I quickly paused, finding that my gaze was being drawn towards the forest

once again.

And in that moment, something in my gut told me that now was the time that I was going to make my departure.

Time was running out, and talking with Squirrelflight had further made me realize just how urgent my mission was, and just how quickly time was slipping away.

There was only one thing that had kept me here so long, and that was getting to fight with and for my Clanmates; I still hated the fact that I'd have to leave them behind for the time being.

I looked back towards the battling cats. *If the Clans don't have enough help here, this battle could never end... and if it does, it won't end in our favor...* I thought with complete dread.

I then looked back towards the forest. I only hesitated for the briefest moment before taking deep breath and slipping out through the dirtplace tunnel. *But this battle will* never *truly end as long as a certain cat is still waiting out in that forest.*

Chapter 33

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

My heart seemed to rise with urgency and determination as I ducked my head and leaped to my side, getting out of the way of my pursuer.

I then quickly swerved around to their back side, proceeding to swipe a claw across one of their hind legs. Just as I had hoped, the slash caused the Dark Forest spirit I was fighting to lose their balance, allowing me to leap forward and press them into the ground.

I looked down at the skinny white tom that was now trapped under my grip. "Given up yet, Snowtuft?" I hissed at the Dark Forest warrior that I had once considered a fellow trainee and mentor.

Despite Snowtuft's lean and leggy frame, I struggled to hold him in place with his forceful squirming. "Giving up to a cat that left the Dark Forest by choice?" he barked back up at me, his blue eyes blazing with anger. "What a joke!"

I held back a growl and sank my claws deeper into the warrior's shoulders. Unfortunately for me, Snowtuft had not been the only Dark Forest cat to taunt my sudden disappearance from the Place of No Stars in this battle. "I'm laughing so hard," I sighed sarcastically.

"Just think, Swiftflight," Snowtuft went on, continuing to wriggle under my grip. "This fight could have been so much easier had you been on our side, had you decided to keep letting us train you!"

I shook my head slowly, lowering my head so that Snowtuft and I were almost muzzle to muzzle. "Any battle feels easy when you have something to fight for," I muttered, my heart beginning to well up with pride. *And there's so much for me to fight for now. I wouldn't have known that if I'd stayed in the Dark Forest.*

To my surprise, Snowtuft let out a hoarse purr of amusement at my words. "See, it's talk just like that! Do you hear yourself? Since you've left us, that little heart of yours has gotten the best of you."

I shut my eyes, Snowtuft's words actually striking a nerve with me for a moment. His words were already beginning to echo in my own mind. *Since you've left us, that little heart of yours has gotten the best of you.*

"Swiftflight, you could have had it all! You could've learned so much... you could've become so much stronger and tougher!" Snowtuft went on, and I opened my eyes again to meet his vindictive, mischievous gaze. "You were so close, and you threw it all away!"

I finally let the growl that had been rising in my throat escape my lips, and the frustration that had been rising up inside of me was practically boiling at this point - frustration at the Dark Forest cat's words, and the fact that I'd let them get to me for even a single heartbeat.

With unsheathed claws, I shifted Snowtuft so that I could pin him down - his back on the ground rather than his stomach, causing us to be face to face. "Close to *what?* Close to completely shutting off my Clanmates? Close to becoming a vile cat with not even an ounce of feeling in his heart?" I snarled in response to Snowtuft's taunting words. "If I've learned anything from my training in the Dark Forest, it's that being tough and strong is not all that matters."

I then looked away from the white tom for a moment, feeling my heart almost physically grow with warmth as I thought about just how true my own words were. *Once I got past worrying about things like valor or strength... that's when I was able to find all of these things that I'm fighting for,* I realized. *Goldenshine, Snowstorm, Ivypool... all of my Clanmates...*

I then almost felt that I would topple over by how much my stomach seemed to flutter. *Cherrypaw...*

The thought of the ginger tabby she-cat, amidst all of the other cats I cared about so deeply, caused my determination and certainty to

surge even higher as I looked back down at Snowtuft. "Which is why, Snowtuft, I'm not going to kill you unless you continue to give me a perfectly good reason to."

I then proceeded to give the Dark Forest tom a warning slash across the muzzle before leaping backwards, releasing Snowtuft from my grip. I watched as he slowly and weakly stood back up.

Once he was on his paws again, I took a step closer to him, seeing the clear glint of fear in his eyes as I gave him a hard, hostile look. "Being tough and strong isn't all that I am, or want to be, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm lacking in either."

I then lifted a single forepaw, letting my claws slowly slide out right in front of the white tom. I raised a single eyebrow, flashing Snowtuft an inquiring look. "So, what's it going to be?"

I then watched as the Dark Forest warrior simply stared back at me for a few moments, looking completely daunted. His eyes then seemed to flash with indignation before he turned around and proceeded to run off out of my sight.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of triumph as I saw Snowtuft's think white tail disappear back into the battle. *It's so easy for Dark Forest cats to give up...* I reflected, already having seen countless amounts of the spirits flee since the battle had begun. *Because they have absolutely nothing that they're fighting for except their own dignity. If that goes away, they can't think of anything else to do but surrender!*

I then shifted my attention towards the camp entrance, my ears pricking and my fur beginning to bristle as its thorns rustled, that sound being followed by many, many pawsteps.

I simply stared back at the bundle of brambles, my fur tingling with anticipation. Who was coming? Even more Dark Forest warriors? *Or what if the apprentices are returning with a message?* I thought, already hoping and praying to StarClan that my second idea was correct. *That would mean that I can be sure that Cherrypaw is safe. And maybe I can even-*

My thoughts were cut off when a cat finally burst through the

tangle of thorns. But instead of Cherrypaw, or any Dark Forest warrior, it was Lionblaze with Graystripe right on his tail. I had to push down my extreme worry and disappointment, hating the fact that the she-cat's location and condition was still completely unknown to me.

Then, just a moment after Lionblaze and Graystripe had run into sight, they were followed by many, many more faded pelts.

It was as I had feared. *Even more Dark Forest cats!* I thought irritably. *They might as well be infinite, for StarClan's sake!*

I immediately let out a determined, indignant hiss and unsheathed my claws once again, ready to fight this entire new wave of Dark Forest cats. And just as I was about to leap at the first spirit that I saw, I stopped myself, utterly confused as I noticed that neither Lionblaze nor Graystripe looked distressed at these cats' arrival.

Cinderheart's yowl clearly reflected my own bafflement. "Who are they?" the gray she-cat called out from just behind me.

Lionblaze flashed a reassuring glance in my direction. "It's okay!" he called back in reply. "They're Ancient allies, from before StarClan! They're on our side!"

Lionblaze's words on their own had already stunned me enough, but I was completely blown away as I watched these supposed "Ancient allies" flow into the ThunderClan clearing, leaping at Dark Forest warriors without hesitation.

But my amazement quickly turned back into apprehension and horror as, just a few moments later, I looked back towards the thorn entrance to see a badger - yes, a *badger* - making their way into camp just behind the Ancients. *Great StarClan, what next?* I thought with exasperation. *The Dark Forest, and now a badger attack?*

I was bracing myself to leap at the large black and white creature just as Blossomfall ran up to stand beside me. "Badger!" she cried out, her blue eyes wide with terror.

Both me and the tortoiseshell she-cat looked over our shoulders as

Firestar burst away from the battle. To my surprise, his green eyes seemed to glow with relief at the sight of the badger. "Midnight!" he breathed, just before turning back around to face his opponents. "It's okay! She's with us!"

I twitched my whiskers with intrigue and shock. *A badger? On our side?* I thought in astonishment. Despite me having heard a bit about this Midnight - the badger that had supposedly helped the sun-drown place journeying cats to find this lake territory - it was still completely amazing to think of any creature other than a cat ever even thinking of helping us. *But at this point, I suppose there's no time to question it.*

I finally broke my gaze away from Midnight, preparing to leap back into the battle. *I've got to make sure that it's still clear which side that* I'm *on, I* joked to myself, my gray-blue eyes already set on the pale tabby she-cat that Dustpelt was currently wrestling with.

But just as I was about to make my pursuit, I paused, surprised as I saw a flash of black brush past me. I looked ahead, my heart nearly skipping a beat as I instantly recognized my father. *Breezepelt!*

The WindClan tom was making his way deeper into the ThunderClan camp, and appeared to be about to leap straight into the battle.

A chill then ran down my spine. *But on whose side?* I wondered, asking myself the same question that had been crossing my mind for days now.

Unfortunately, that question was immediately answered for me when, to my dismay, Breezepelt leaped straight at Lionblaze, bowling over the pale tabby tom. *No...*

I was now completely frozen in place as Breezepelt stood over Lionblaze, ripping his claws along my Clanmate's cheek. "You're not as strong as I expected," I could hear my father muttering, his amber eyes glowing with malice.

"Breezepelt, no!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the silver-and-white tabby pelt of Ivypool brushing past me, racing up to meet the two fighting toms. "Don't do it! Please! Do you really want to destroy the Clans for Brokenstar's sake?"

Breezepelt's Dark Forest mentor...

I continued to watch in complete horror as Breezepelt then pulled back Lionblaze's head, proceeding to smack it hard against the ground. It seemed like my father was able to completely ignore Lionblaze struggling beneath him. "This has nothing to do with Brokenstar," he growled back at Ivypool. "Lionblaze should have never been born. None of them should."

The black WindClan tom then flicked his tail triumphantly towards Hollyleaf's body that was lying just a few fox-lengths away. "She's dead; now it's your turn, Lionblaze."

I then felt my fur beginning to rise up even more, and I had to hold back a gasp as Breezepelt then bend his head down to bite into Lionblaze's neck. I felt so nauseous and dizzy that I was sure that I was going to fall over onto my side. *He didn't even have to hesitate.*

The ThunderClan warrior continued to wriggle and struggle beneath Breezepelt's grip. "We're kin!" he gasped as he tried to fight for breath.

"Never!" Breezepelt hissed back.

For a moment, I still felt as if I couldn't move a muscle as I watched the scene continue to unfold in front of me. I'd already seen a good amount of my father's vicious, malevolent behavior, yet I still found that I was completely appalled and repulsed.

That could've been me, I realized as I continued to stare off at Breezepelt sinking his teeth into Lionblaze, his own *brother*. *That really could have been me - harming my own kin without a second thought.* It was a thought that had occurred to me many times since I'd left the Dark Forest, but now, it had truly never felt more sickening to think about.

But it gave me all the drive I needed to finally snap out of my horrified thoughts and prepare to run over and break up this fight myself; mustering up all of the courage I would need in order to defy my own father.

And just as I was about to jump forward, claws outstretched, I was nearly intercepted as a pelt almost identical to mine barged past me. I watched, wide-eyed, as Crowfeather pounced into the fight himself, sinking his claws into Breezepelt's shoulders and hauling him off of Lionblaze.

"This has to stop!" the dark gray WindClan tom growled as he pinned his son to the ground. "I will not watch you harm a whisker on that cat!"

Breezepelt wriggled under his father's grip, his amber eyes filled with rage. "I always knew that you hated me!"

"I never hated you!" Crowfeather insisted. "That's just what you were determined to believe. And Nightcloud encouraged you."

"It's not her fault!"

"No," Crowfeather then hissed, breaking his gaze from his son's for just a moment. "I should have done something much earlier. But now it's too late. You chose the Dark Forest."

Crowfeather then backed off of Breezepelt, hauling his son to his paws and flinging him away. "Get out of here!"

I continued to watch as Breezepelt stared back at his father, his eyes wide, for a few moments. He then turned away from him, beginning to run out of the camp clearing.

And although he clearly didn't realize, he was heading directly towards me.

I became as frozen as an icicle all over again as Breezepelt's amber gaze locked with mine, which caused him to abruptly stop in his tracks. Although it had been many moons since the two of us had ever directly interacted, it was clear from his wide, surprised amber eyes that he had instantly recognized me. I even thought that I

could see a glint of shame there.

And just like the first time we'd first come face to face with each other, there were several long, uncomfortable moments of silence as we stared back at each other. I had braced myself for him to leap at me as soon as he'd laid his eyes on me. *He didn't even hesitate to leap at Lionblaze, his own half-brother. Who's to say that he wouldn't attack his son?*

But despite my discomfort and worry, I found myself speaking to my father. "Things don't have to be this way," I blurted out to him, letting my heart rule my actions once again.

Breezepelt blinked back at me, as if he was shocked that his grown son had the ability to speak. "What?"

"It doesn't have to be this way, Breezepelt," I repeated to him, having slightly hesitated to address the black tom by name, not being sure how he'd respond to being called "father".

Breezepelt then let out a hiss and broke his gaze from me. "What are you talking about?" he hissed, despite clearly already understanding what I was trying to tell him.

I forced myself to take a step closer to my father. "You know exactly what I'm talking about," I replied, sharpening my meow. "You don't have to hold these grudges that the Dark Forest has put upon you. You shouldn't have to believe all of these things that they're putting into your head - that *Brokenstar* is putting into your head-"

"Nothing has been put into my head!" Breezepelt growled, cutting off my words. "Brokenstar has only helped me to see what I'd been trying to ignore for so many moons!"

"Foxdung!" I growled back at him, not even realizing the risk I was taking of raising my voice at a cat like Breezepelt. But after all I had been through with Ashfur, I knew that my words would resonate with my father. "That's what he wants you to think. He's only been feeding you lies that he knew would get you to where he wanted you to be. Crowfeather, your own father, hating you, or that Lionblaze, Hollyleaf and Jayfeather should have never been born -

all lies! Those are horrible, absolutely *terrible* thoughts that aren't true at all, yet you believe them to be as true and real as the sky, or the ground beneath our paws."

I then took yet another step closer to my father. "Deep down, you are aware of this, and are trying to ignore it, for whatever reason," I went on. "But you shouldn't. You don't have to let the Dark Forest's words influence you anymore."

Breezepelt then let out another hiss, shooting his blaring amber gaze back towards me. "Who says that they've-"

I didn't let Breezepelt finish. "I know, and *you* know that *I* know exactly what you've been put through. And I know that there's a way out," I meowed to him, my voice clear and confident, to my own surprise. "I know that it's scary, and defiance towards them feels like a weakness, but it's not. It's not at all."

I then felt a bit more encouraged when my father's gaze seemed to soften the smallest bit, and for some reason, it seemed to briefly flash with immense guilt as well. "There's more to you than this, Breezepelt. If you left, you'd see that - others would see it, too," I went on, locking my eyes on Breezepelt's once again. "Crowfeather is wrong - it's not too late."

With my words, Breezepelt actually hesitated for several moments, and his amber eyes revealed uncertainty for just a moment before washing over with anger and hostility once again. "Why should I listen to you?" he then scoffed.

I took a deep breath, trying to push down regret and pain as I spoke my next words. "If you've given those Dark Forest cats moons worth of your time, I'd hope that you could give you own *son* at least a bit of acknowledgement."

I then watched, trying to stand tall as Breezepelt stared back at me. For many heartbeats, I couldn't read his expression to save my life. I might as well have been Jayfeather with how blind I was to his emotions. *But I'm sure many cats would have said that about me a few moons ago...*

But as I continued to look back at my father, I thought that I could begin to see the smallest glint of what looked like uncertainty and regret. *And... is that... admiration? No way.*

I honestly didn't get time to double-check, Breezepelt quickly breaking his gaze from me. He looked over his shoulder, staring directly at where my mother, Goldenshine, was currently helping Nightwing get to the medicine den.

He then shifted his gaze over to Crowfeather, who was standing in the same place he'd left his father in, speaking to Leafpool.

Then, after many long moments, I nearly flinched as Breezepelt's gaze then flicked back to me. His mouth began to open, as if he wanted to say something. But he shut his jaws just as quickly as they'd dropped. He then let out a hiss, finally racing out of the camp and disappearing from sight.

I stared off at the place my father had vanished for many heartbeats. I honestly couldn't quite grasp how I was feeling, or whether or not I felt I'd actually delivered with the words I'd spoken to him. *Do I actually believe what I said to him?* I wondered. *Or... is Breezepelt so far gone, so influenced by cats like Brokenstar that there's no way he'd ever be able to save himself like I did?*

I then let out a sigh as I finally broke my gaze from the camp entrance. *There weren't many cats that believed that I could change, but I am. I'm attempting to, at least,* I tried to reassure myself. *I was telling Breezepelt the truth. One day he'll realize who his true enemy is.*

I finally decided to push thoughts of Breezepelt away as I looked back towards the battle. Unfortunately, the camp was still abundant with spirit cats. While many of them were the Ancients that Lionblaze and Graystripe had brought in, I could still clearly see the ragged, wound-filled pelts of the Dark Forest cats spread around everywhere.

Since the battle had begun, I'd been sickened by how many cats I'd been able to recognize after my training in the Dark Forest, and having to fight against them and not with them felt strange and bizarre, but most certainly not *wrong*.

But among all of these cats that I unfortunately almost knew as well as many of my ThunderClan Clanmates, the one that I'd feared seeing the most was not present, and I hadn't seen him at all.

I scanned my eyes over the battling cats, narrowing my eyes as I sought out the gray-speckled pelt of Ashfur. *Honestly... I don't completely hate the idea of getting to sink my claws into that mangy fur again...*

I then let out a huff, looking away as I quickly realized that he was still nowhere in sight. *Strange...* I mused.

I then flicked my ears as I thought crossed my mind. *I wonder what became of Lilypetal speaking with him in the Dark Forest? Did she discover anything about what he might be up to?*

My eyes then began to narrow once again. *She'd said that she needed to speak with him before the battle,* I recalled. *Why did she need to make sure to speak with him* before *the battle? Why couldn't we be involved? She wouldn't need to do that unless...*

I then stood completely frozen yet again as I continued to recall what Lilypetal had alluded to in our meeting just a few days before. It had all seemed to snap. *Oh my StarClan...*

I then found myself frantically beginning to look around the ThunderClan camp, whipping my head in every single possible direction in search of Lilypetal. To my complete dismay, at first glance she was nowhere in sight. I was sure that I couldn't see her brown tabby-and-white pelt among the heap of battling cats.

My heart began to race like it never had before. My panic drove me to pelt across camp, clawing and slashing at any Dark Forest cat that tried to get in my way.

Once I was in a spot where I wasn't practically being smashed by living cats and spirits, I rose my head and gaped my mouth open. Catching any one scent had been difficult in the camp clearing, but closer to the dens, finding a single scent was luckily significantly easier for me.

And thank StarClan, I almost immediately caught wind of my kin's scent, and began to follow it.

I wasn't following it for very long, and I seemed to feel my heart drop when I quickly realized that Lilypetal's scent was leading out towards the dirtplace. *The way out of camp that cats take who don't want to be seen...*

While that was unsettling enough, what made it worse was that the tabby-and-white she-cat's scent wasn't as fresh as it could be.

She'd been away from camp for a while now.

I was completely terrified for my kin at this point, and even though I couldn't be completely sure of what was happening, I still felt as if we were running out of time to stop it. I whipped myself around once again, wildly looking around in the hopes of finding a golden brown tabby pelt as soon as possible.

I managed to feel a bit of relief as I quickly noticed Goldenshine grappling with a small gray-and-white Dark Forest cat near the Highledge.

I pelted over to my mother as speedily as I could. "Goldenshine!" I called out to her. I then skidded to a halt. "Goldenshine!"

Goldenshine looked up from the she-cat she was fighting, who she currently had pinned down. "Swiftflight?"

She then stepped back, proceeding to let out a hiss and slash the small Dark Forest warrior away. She then turned to face me, her gray eyes wide and worried. "What's the matter?"

I knew that I couldn't beat around the bush - there was no time. "It's Lilypetal," I blurted out. "She's gone!"

Chapter 34

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

With my son's words, I suddenly felt as if the ground had disappeared beneath my paws.

"Lilypetal's gone?" I nearly cried out, barely being able to hear my own words from how loudly my head seemed to be pounding. "What do you mean, she's *gone?*"

"She's not in camp," Swiftflight answered sharply, his gray-blue eyes wide. "I've looked for her everywhere."

"Absolutely everywhere?"

Swiftflight then rolled his eyes. "No, I decided to leave out a few shrubs next to the Highledge just for kicks," he hissed before proceeding to give an irritated lash of his tail. "Yes, absolutely everywhere!"

I felt my heart sink, and I had to stand up as straight as I could to keep my legs from shaking. "Oh my StarClan, no..." I nearly whispered as I brushed past Swiftflight, padding ahead. "No, no, no!" *She left before I even got a chance to stop her!* I thought, my panic rising with each breath I took. *Oh, Lilypetal! I hope Swiftflight didn't discover her disappearance too late...*

I quickly heard my son's pawsteps running up to meet me as I made my way across the camp clearing. "Goldenshine, wait! Where are you going?"

I then abruptly stopped in my tracks as he pelted ahead to intercept me. To my surprise, he looked almost as frightened as I felt. "Goldenshine, don't you realize what could be going on?" he pressed to me. "Lilypetal's going to-"

I shut my eyes tightly and shouldered past the dark gray tom, already knowing that I wouldn't be able to handle hearing out loud what he likely would have said. "Swiftflight, I know exactly what she's going to do," I meowed to him tautly, cutting off his words.

I then paused in my travel once again, slowly turning around to face Swiftflight, and the smallest shudder ran through my body as the image of Ashfur standing alone in the ThunderClan forest flashed in my mind once again. "I... I saw..." I began, trying to figure out how to describe what I'd seen just a bit earlier in the night. My attempts at telling Lilypetal herself hadn't gone very well, and the both of us had quickly gotten lost in the battle.

I then shook my head quickly and let out a huff, realizing that another cat needed to be in on this conversation. "Hold on," I then muttered. "We need to find Thornclaw first."

I held back a frustrated growl as Swiftflight instantly opened his mouth again, seemingly wanting to protest. But to my relief, he quickly shut his jaws and gave me a reluctant nod before proceeding to lead the way as we both dashed around the camp clearing in search of my father.

And the entire time that we searched, my heart was pounding so strongly and so loudly that it almost seemed to be the only thing that I could hear, and I practically felt dizzy with panic. *I've never felt a helplessness like this before, even when I've thought that my* own *life was hanging in the balance,* I realized as I continued to flit my eyes around the clearing. *At least then, I had some control of the situation. But now, I know that Lilypetal had left camp, and I also know of the likely reason that she's left camp, and I was too late to stop her from leaving at all.*

I then nearly had to hold back an anxious whimper. *Oh, Starclan, be with her, or let us catch her before you'd even need to save her tail!*

Well, StarClan was already giving us *one* blessing - Swiftflight and had only looked for what seemed like a few heartbeats before I noticed him pause in front of me. He glanced back at me over his shoulder and nodded to something in front of him.

Before I could even join Swiftflight, and see where he'd spotted Thornclaw, I hopped backward and let out a startled yelp as my father's golden brown tabby pelt flashed into sight, nearly crashing into my son's dark gray one.

Swiftflight let out a hiss and backed away. "Geez, come at me quicker, why don't you?" he muttered, giving his fur a shake.

Thornclaw simply acknowledged Swiftflight's with an apologetic glance. "Here you are," he breathed, sighing with relief. "Thank StarClan."

I tilted my head in confusion as I finally ran up to flank Swiftflight. "Here *we* are?" I replied, raising an eyebrow. "Were you looking for us, too?"

I quickly realized how incredibly preoccupied my father seemed - he hadn't made eye contact with me even once yet. In fact, his eyes had probably landed on every single thing in camp except for Swiftflight and me. "Have been for a while," he answered after a few heartbeats.

He then finally met my gaze, revealing his troubled pale blue eyes. "Have either of you seen Lilypetal?"

I felt my heart sink as soon as my father's words met my ears, and I exchanged a dejected look with Swiftflight. "Exactly what we were about to ask you..." I murmured.

"I don't see her anywhere," Thornclaw then meowed, his eyes flashing with disappointment. "I've had one eye on her since I returned to ThunderClan, and the moment I decided to..." My father then closed his eyes and turned his head away for a moment. His gaze was darker and more urgent once his lids flew open again. "You all haven't seen her, either?"

"Swiftflight seemed sure that she was missing," I answered, gesturing to my son with my tail. I then turned to face him, giving him a hard, inquisitive stare. "*Are* you sure that she's missing?"

Swiftflight sighed and gave a single nod. "More than sure,

unfortunately," he replied, causing my heart to sink even lower, and beat even faster. He then lashed his tail towards the small opening that lied between the warriors den and the medicine den clearing. "The only traces that I found of her led out towards the dirtplace, into the forest."

Thornclaw's eyes were now slowly beginning to fill up with dread, just as my entire body was rising with dread. "Was she by herself?"

"Yes, she was."

"And you're sure that she's gone all the way out into the forest?" I then pressed to my son, already partly knowing how stupid my question probably sounded.

Swiftflight whipped his head around to look back at me. "Why are you asking *me?*" he nearly hissed. "You were the one who claimed to know exactly what Lilypetal was doing."

My son's blazing eyes then grew solemn as he let his gaze flick back and forth between Thornclaw and me. "But... I figured that we all did, after what she said at our last meeting."

I gave a slow nod - Swiftflight being correct to some extent, but I knew for a fact that he and Thornclaw hadn't had a chance to be able to see what I'd witnessed on our territory, and were surely going to grow even more anxious once I told them about it.

I took a deep breath before speaking. "I personally can be sure," I began. "Because what I saw in the forest earlier nearly confirms *all* of it..."

Thornclaw slowly narrowed his pale blue eyes as he took a step closer to me. "What did you see out in the forest, Goldenshine?"

I had no reason to bury the lede, especially when we were losing time the more that we discussed Lilypetal's disappearance. "Ashfur's spirit was there in plain sight," I answered sharply. "He was all by himself, and he seemed to be waiting for somebody."

I then nearly took a step back as I watched Thornclaw's eyes seemed to blaze like a wildfire for a brief moment. "You say

'someone' as if you're suddenly not sure of who he could possibly be waiting for!" he nearly growled, his typically well-maintained short-temper beginning to unleash. "It's as Swiftflight said, we all know."

He then lashed his golden brown tabby tail towards the dirtplace passage. "And we can't let it happen," he went on sharply. "I don't care if Lilypetal wants to put an end to that fox-heart's treachery to keep us safe."

I shut my eyes, trying to shield the emotion that was welling up inside of them. It was now clear to me that Thornclaw carried the same exact suspicions that I'd been having. *Lilypetal is trying to get Ashfur alone so that she can kill him, and she didn't want us there so that he couldn't hurt us,* I realized. *Plain and simple. And crazy!*

"I wanted to trust her. I still do," Thornclaw went on. "But I've always had my doubts, as soon as she said that she had a plan, and that Ashfur was involved."

His pale blue eyes flashed with determination as he whipped himself around, making a break for the dirtplace entrance. "I can't stand to let my mate put herself in this kind of danger."

You can barely stand to see her get a thorn in her paw, I couldn't help but joke as Swiftflight and I began to follow behind him.

But I quickly pulled myself away from my humored thinking as Thornclaw continued to speak. "We're either going to stop her, or-"

"Not let her do it on her own," I finished for my father as we arrived at the entrance.

Thornclaw stopped in his tracks, turning around to face me and my son once again. "Exactly," he meowed, giving a single approving nod.

I managed to feel a twinge of satisfaction hearing my father's plan, as I'd been hoping throughout our entire conversation that chasing after our incredibly daring, courageous kin was going to be the consensus. "I figured that you'd be on board," I murmured, returning Thornclaw's nod. I then looked to my son, raising a single eyebrow.

"Swiftflight?"

The dark gray tom's eyes were glowing with certainty, and his white chest puffed out slightly. "I would've gone on my own if you two had decided to be mouse-hearts," he replied, his voice a slight purr.

And you'd have no one stopping you from checking to see if Cherrypaw is in the forest.

Thornclaw let out a snort and nuzzled his younger kin's head with his tail. "Reassuring, but would never happen." My father then let out a sigh, his eyes growing darker and serious once again as he turned around. "When your best friend is involved, there really is no time to let yourself be a mouse-heart."

I had to push back emotion with my eyelids once again. "Or when your mother is involved," I murmured half to myself before following Thornclaw up the path, hoping that further discussing a plan would help me to get past my immense worry. "Okay, I suggest that we head straight for the clearing of bramble bushes near the WindClan border," I meowed, looking down at the ground as I began to fall deep into thought. "First, I want to see if we can find-"

"Lionheart?"

I looked back up at Thornclaw, flashing him an extremely confused look even though he wouldn't see it. "What? No, we need to find-"

"Frostfur?!"

I came to a stop just behind Thornclaw, who had for some reason had completely come to a stop, and seemed to be looking ahead at something in the camp clearing. "No!" I replied irritably. "Thornclaw, you really need to get your priorities straight..."

I quickly trailed off of my words as I followed my father's gaze. And with what I saw when I did, my mouth might as well have dropped all the way to the ground. "Great StarClan..."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could Swiftflight also stopping behind me. He was also looking out towards the battling cats. "And I

assume that you mean that literally?"

The most that I could do in reply to my son's words was give the smallest flick of my tail, because I was practically frozen in awe with what I saw in front of me.

The ThunderClan camp seemed to be overflowing with spirits. But now, it didn't just consist of the nearly-transparent, mangy spirits of the Dark Forest cats; these new spirit cats seemed to glow as brightly as the full moon, and their pelts shimmered like light reflecting against the lake.

And also unlike the Dark Forest cats, these spirits brought me so much comfort, as I actually recognized so many of them. *Honeyfern!* I thought excitedly as I saw the light brown she-cat ran past. *And Longtail! Oh my goodness, so many cats that I miss so much!*

"I can't believe it..." I then breathed. "StarClan came to help us?"

Thornclaw gave a nod that only cats close to him would probably be able to see. "It appears so," he murmured, his eyes narrowing. "All the more reason for us to be able to leave."

Not waiting for any reply, my father then began to run ahead once again - his wonder at the appearance of StarClan and his old Clanmates only being short-lived.

And as much as I felt a tug to stay and fight with my ancestors, to finish this battle once and for all, I knew that Thornclaw was probably right. I didn't know how I felt about admitting that the cat we were going after probably needed more help than the Clans did at the moment - with StarClan, the Ancients and the Clans fighting against the Dark Forest, they'd surely win. They had to.

I quickened my pace from where I ran just behind Thornclaw, feeling more panicked and anxious than ever. *But a heartless, indignant cat against a determined, courageous, selfless one... I can't be as sure, unfortunately.*

"Wait!"

With the voice that called out from behind us, Swiftflight,

Thornclaw and I all exchanged a wary glance before pausing and glancing over our shoulders.

To my surprise, I immediately recognized the white and gray pelt of Snowstorm dashing up to meet us. She was practically panting by the time that she came to a halt. "Where are you all going in such a hurry?" she asked us, her blue eyes surprisingly determined.

I took a quick glance back at Thornclaw and Swiftflight, and in the brief moment that we shared, I could see in both of their eyes that they trusted the young she-cat with the information that we had. *And plus, trying to come up with a lie would take up too much time.*

I tried to explain to Snowstorm as quickly as I could, pushing down my frustration and anxiety at the slight delay at finding my mother. "Well, Snowstorm - we're chasing after Lilypetal," I answered her. "We... we think that she might be putting herself in some unnecessary danger."

Snowstorm's eyes slowly narrowed down into slits. "Is she, now?" she muttered.

I gave her a frantic nod. "I saw Ashfur alone out in the forest, and we're almost sure that he's not going to be alone in a moment," I further explained, my own words causing my panic to rise up drastically.

I whipped myself around, prompting the toms forward with my tail. "Which is why we are in such a hurry-"

Snowstorm didn't seem to be phased by my eagerness to leave. Instead, she took a step closer to me, her eyes still narrowed and determined. "Let me come with you."

I looked back at the younger she-cat in complete bewilderment. "*What?*"

Snowstorm shook her head quickly before meeting my gaze again. "Wait, let me rephrase that," she meowed, taking yet another step closer to me. "I'm coming with you."

I found myself freezing, falling deep into thought as Swiftflight ran

up to face Snowstorm. "What?" my son exclaimed, looking back at his best friend with wide eyes. "Snowstorm, you are *not*-"

I raised my tail, preventing my son from saying any more. "Swiftflight, it's alright," I murmured, my gaze still on Snowstorm.

Swiftflight clearly wasn't understanding Snowstorm's motivation for wanting to come like I already had. "Are you crazy?" he hissed at me. "In what situation could bringing another cat into danger be construed as *alright?*"

I flashed Swiftflight a grave, warning glance. "This one," I replied sharply. "Let her come." *If tonight is truly the night, there is nothingwe can do. It is out of our paws. We have done our part. Let it be.*

I then watched as both Swiftflight's and Thornclaw's eyes seemed to wash over with a dark kind of understanding. They both clearly knew what Snowstorm's persistence to join in our rescue meant, but they hated it and feared it as much as I did.

And the dread I was now feeling made it immensely difficult for me to look back at the white she-cat. "You're right, Snowstorm," I nearly whispered to her. "You're coming with us."

I then turned away from the younger warrior to run ahead of the group. "And right now, we need to go! There's absolutely no time to waste." I then paused, glancing back at my father apologetically and beckoning him forward with my tail. "Are you leading, Thornclaw?"

To my surprise, the golden brown tabby tom immediately shook his head. "That's alright," he meowed, his pale blue eyes glowing with pride. "I'm going to let the aspiring hero take the reins."

I could only let the affection and love for my father and his faith in me take over for the briefest moment. Instead, the determination and courage that his words had given me had to do that. *You can make your lifelong dream come true tonight, Goldenshine. Be a hero.*

I took a deep breath as I looked out into the forest. "Alright, then," I murmured. "Let's go."

Without another word or delay, I then pelted out into the forest, and I could hear my Clanmates hard on my paws. *We're coming for you, Lilypetal!*

As we made our way out of camp, I quickly realized that Swiftflight had been right - Lilypetal's scent was definitely present. It unfortunately wasn't nearly as fresh as it could be.

I flashed a nervous glance back at the group before slowing down my pawsteps in order to more easily track Lilypetal's scent.

We speedily were getting deeper and deeper into the forest. And thank StarClan, my mother's scent was getting stronger the further that we went. *It's not good at all that she's already come so far, but at least we know that we're getting closer to her. Soon, maybe we'll just find her wandering alone in the forest.*

But I soon came to a complete stop, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with apprehension when I realized that a more sharp, sour scent had now mingled with Lilypetal's. *Nevermind.*

I slowly rose my head, but didn't look behind me. "Both Lilypetal and Ashfur have been here," I murmured.

I heard quick, nimble pawsteps getting closer and closer to me, and I turned to see that Swiftflight had run up to join me, and was gaping his mouth open. "You're right, but it appears as if Ashfur was here first," he observed before beginning to walk ahead of me, his muzzle still in the air. "And from here, she just seems to be following his scent."

He then paused, turning to look back at us. "Which means that wherever Ashfur is, Lilypetal is going to likely find him before *we* can find *her*."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Thornclaw barked behind me, causing me to flinch. "We need to keep going."

With my father's commanding words, I pelted forward once again, letting Swiftflight take the lead this time. I knew quite well that my son was an excellent tracker, but it was a skill he hadn't quite given

himself credit for yet.

I then briefly looked back at where Thornclaw and Snowstorm were following just behind me. *She's been a bit quiet since we left camp...* I observed, having to push down more fear and dread as I was reminded of why she was here at all.

I then looked ahead once again, thoughts of my mother replacing ones of Snowstorm as the scents of Ashfur and Lilypetal simultaneously flooded through my nostrils.

While I'm sure that any cat would agree that what she was likely doing was crazy risky and dangerous, what was so amazing was that Lilypetal very well knew that. *She knows that things like this are risky and dangerous,* I realized, love and pride for my mother welling up inside of me. *But she never cares about that. She would throw herself into a pool of hungry badgers if it meant that those she cared about would be safe.*

I found myself shaking my head slowly in amazement as I continued to run. "Lilypetal is the most selfless cat that I know," I panted, not sure if Thornclaw, Snowstorm or Swiftflight had even heard me.

But I glanced to my side to see that Thornclaw was just behind me. "She's the most selfless cat that I know," he breathed, his pale blue eyes beginning to shimmer as he seemed to think about his long-time mate. "It's all... incredible, in a way. She's incredible..."

My father then shook his head quickly, seemingly bringing himself back into focus. "Which is why I *can't* lose her again," he proclaimed, picking up speed.

Despite my slowly faltering energy, I forced myself to also run even faster, as the scents of both Ashfur and Lilypetal were becoming even stronger with each pawstep that we took.

And now, we'd come so far that the stream at the WindClan border had come into sight. I abruptly came to a stop, halted the group with my tail, and raised my muzzle in the air once again.

And my fur slowly began to rise with the discovery I was quickly able to make. "Lilypetal's scent is almost fresh here," I realized out loud.

"And it's getting fresher," Swiftflight called back from where he stood just by the stream.

I urgently ran up to meet my son. At this point, my nerves were so strong that I couldn't even try to push them down. "Where are we heading, Swiftflight?"

I simply watched, the fur on my back continuing to rise as the dark gray tom opened his jaws once again.

I was already practically being torn to bits with anticipation once Swiftflight looked back at me. His gray-blue eyes were grave, yet determined. "Out towards the lake," he answered. "Where the stream and the lake meet at the waterfall."

Chapter 35

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"...and there you have it," I finished, pausing in my pacing to face the gray-speckled tom in front of me once again. I then sat down, wrapped my tail around my paws, and tilted my head to the side. "What do you think, Ashfur? I get something that I want, and you get something that you've wanted for a very, very long time."

I then narrowed my eyes as I began to twitch my whiskers. "And something tells me that you almost want it more than power, or more than information to use against the Clans, hm?"

I tried to sit patiently, my fur tingling from the strange, eerie cold of the Dark Forest as Ashfur sat in silence, his deep blue eyes not revealing a thing as he seemed to fall deep into thought.

But after a few moments, the tom let out a sigh. "Very well," he breathed, only sounding a bit wary as he stood up. "Where would this transaction take place?"

I was trying to hold back my relief and triumph as much as I could. Instead, I took a step closer to Ashfur, giving the Dark Forest warrior a hard look. "Once you and the rest of the Dark Forest cats arrive, travel to the edge of the stream between the ThunderClan and WindClan border - there's a waterfall that pours down into the lake," I explained sharply. "Meet me there as soon as you can. You surely don't want to waste any time."

Well, at the moment, it sure felt like Ashfur *was* wanting to waste time.

It felt as if I had been pacing at the edge of the stream for moons and moons, my heart pounding in anticipation of the gray-speckled tom's arrival. *If he even comes at all...*

I then stopped in my tracks, giving a flick of my ears as I felt my stomach twist up into a knot. *What if he really doesn't show up?*

I then shook my head quickly, let out an irritated hiss, and continued in my pacing. *Don't be silly. What I told him pretty much ensures that he's going meet me here*, I reminded myself. *I mean, it's been the driving factor for everything that he's done. Surely he wouldn't give up on it now?*

I then let out a sigh, trying to push away any worried thoughts as I continued to pace. I tried my best to focus on the sound of the water pounding down to the ground from the waterfall that flowed from the stream just a few tail-lengths away from my spot.

And while the stream was typically a very familiar spot for me, I was currently on WindClan's side of it. I knew it was exactly where I needed to be, but I hated that I didn't at least have the comfort of smelling my own Clan's scent markers.

After a bit more nervous pacing, I decided to walk towards the edge of the stream once again and peer over the small cliff that led to the water below. I nearly let out a startled yelp as my paw touched the dead tree that stretched across the water - connecting one of side the stream to the other, giving a cat easy access to each side of the border.

After I got over the fact that I hadn't tripped and fallen over the edge of the cliff, I backed away a pawstep and touched the log with one of my forepaws. I watched as it shook just a little, the other side shifting from its spot just a little.

I let out a small grunt of satisfaction. *Good.*

I then more cautiously looked down at the stream from where I stood at the top of the cliff. *Gee, that would've been a bit of a fall...* I thought, a small chill running down my spine.

The water below seemed to be cheering me on with how wildly and rapidly it flowed, winding its way around the reeds, and crashing against the rocks before making its way down the waterfall. And even from my distance from the stream far beneath my paws, I

could just barely see my own reflection in the flowing water.

Just as I always did when I actually got to take a look at myself, I could easily see the determination and desire burning in my hazel eyes.

Now, I knew that I'd have to use it to my advantage, just as I always had in the past. *You've always had a certain gleam of determination in your eyes, from the day that you first arrived in ThunderClan.* Firestar's words a couple days ago echoed back into my mind. *Since then, it's seemed to grow stronger, darker and deeper with every moon.*

I then took a deep breath as I looked away from the water. *Firestar was definitely right about that,* I then thought. *Since I've found ThunderClan, and found a real family and Clanmates infinitely worth fighting for, my determination has risen and blazed as strongly as the sunrise itself.*

"Lilypetal."

With that deep, familiar voice that I heard in the distance, I froze in my place, closed my eyes, and took one long, deep breath as I sent a quick prayer to StarClan. *And this is why.*

I the forced myself to turn around and look towards the other side of the stream to see Ashfur slowly approaching into sight, his blue eyes gleaming through the darkness. *After so many moons of anger, fear, resentment and grief, this is where it ends.* "Ashfur," I meowed, running up to the edge of the stream to greet him. "Welcome."

The Dark Forest warrior let out a snort, meeting me from the ThunderClan side of the stream. "Welcome?" he replied, lashing his tail. "You say 'welcome' as if *I'm* the one that's kept *you* waiting."

I gave him a shrug, the edges of my mouth extending into a small smirk. "Well, I *was* the one standing here while you emerged from the forest like a snake with legs."

"Well, you see, Lilypetal, I actually was here much earlier - just as we *all* arrived," Ashfur explained. He then sat down, his eyes widening as he seemed to be feigning an offended, surprised

expression. "I wandered over to this meeting spot to find that you weren't here yet!"

I sat down as well, trying to ignore my violently pounding heart that almost seemed to be defeaning me. "Well, you see, *Ashfur*, I have many, many other cats aside from you that I needed to help tonight," I meowed to Ashfur, flashing him a slightly teasing look. *Maybe you could've done without the entire heap of Dark Forest cats attacking my Clanmates, and then I would've been here on time...*

I then brought my attention to a small pebble that lied at my paws, and I flicked it over the edge of the cliff with one of my claws. "I warned you that we might be a little late."

Ashfur let out a huff, narrowing his eyes. "I suppose that you did."

I was then surprised to see him stand up and begin to almost wander aimlessly around ThunderClan's border. "With that in mind, I decided that I may as well take a little walk around this old territory while I was waiting for you," he breathed, slowly lifting his head to look up at the looming oak trees. "Reminisce a little, search for memories, looking back at my past self that once thought he'd *lost* everything..."

I simply watched the gray-speckled tom, actually managing a purr of amusement as I listened to his muse. "You are one strange cat, Ashfur."

The Dark Forest warrior then abruptly paused, his gaze flashing with anger as he whipped his head back in my direction. "And you are lucky that you're doing me a favor, otherwise I certainly wouldn't let that comment slide."

I then felt my heart skip a beat as he padded back up to his edge of the cliff, and his blue gaze burned into mine once again. "So, where is she?"

I tried to keep my fur flat, and simply flashed Ashfur a mockingly confused look. "Where is who?"

Ashfur then barred his teeth, almost as if to hold back a growl as he

rolled his eyes. "As much as I hate to admit it, I know that you're smarter than that, Lilypetal," he muttered. He then meet me with an even harsher gaze that demanded the answer he was seeking. "Squirrelflight - where is she? You promised me that I'd get to speak with her, and convince her to come back to the Dark Forest with me."

The gray-speckled tom's eyes then sparkled ominously for a moment, which simultaneously sickened me and gave me a strong twinge of hope. "You told me that you'd bring her to me," Ashfur went on, taking another step closer to the edge as his eyes began to blaze with eagerness and desperation. "Have you-"

"Keep your fur on, Ashfur," I replied, cutting the tom off.

I then gave the log that stretched across the stream one last tap with one of my paws before flashing him a reassuring glance, pushing away the guilt with what I was about to say. "Yes, everything's ready. Squirrelflight came here with me, but she slipped away for a moment to get a drink further down the stream."

I then took a deep breath before taking a step back, eagerly beckoning Ashfur over with my tail. "But she'll be so happy to see you once she gets back!"

I watched nervously as Ashfur's gaze immediately fell down to the log that would serve as his bridge across the stream. *Hopefully.* "This is new," the tom muttered, lightly jabbing at the log with a paw. His blue eyes glowed with suspicion.

I made sure that Ashfur wouldn't get any time to question it. As much as he had the right to be suspicious, there wasn't any room for any suspicion with what I hoped would happen.

I let out a snort and gave the warrior another shrug. "Oh, that old tree was doomed to fall any day now, so I figured I'd go ahead and push it over while I waited," I explained. "That way neither of us have to deal with taking a chance of missing the leap it'd take to get across without it."

I didn't let Ashfur even try to reply, and began to pad deeper into

WindClan's territory. "Come on! Let's get this done - you get Squirrelflight; I get the satisfaction of knowing that you're staying away from my family and Clanmates," I called back to him.

I then slowly came to a stop a few fox-lengths away, turning around to look back at Ashfur. "Let's finish the deal."

I then watched, having to push down my apprehension more than ever as Ashfur glared back at me, his gaze dark and uncertain. But despite that, he actually put a paw up onto the log, and then proceeded to step all the way onto it after a moment's hesitation. He peered down at the rumbling water below, giving the log the lightest shake before seemingly deciding that it was safe, and beginning to walk across.

I only got to feel relief for the briefest moment at the fact that he'd fallen for my words. *I'll have to bask in my success later,* I told myself, my courage replacing apprehension as I began to pelt back towards the stream.

I then leaped onto the log just in time to prevent Ashfur from making it all the way across. *Now, it's showtime.*

As I had expected, Ashfur looked immensely bewildered at the fact that I'd blocked his way. "Lilypetal, what are you doing?" he hissed back at me, unsheathing his claws so that they sank down into the bark.

I simply gave him yet another shrug. "I'm standing on this log," I answered him, tilting my head to the side and raising a single eyebrow. "What does it look like?"

Ashfur's eyes slowly narrowed down into slits. "Get out of the way," he demanded to me through gritted teeth.

I looked up to the sky, pretending to contemplate his words for a moment before flashing him a mocking-apologetic glance. "I'm sorry, Ashfur," I sighed to him. "I can't do that."

I was then shocked to see Ashfur's eyes actually flash with fear and uncertainty for a heartbeat. He whipped his head to each side just

once before locking his gaze with mine, and I found that I was looking back into two blue flames. "Lilypetal," he muttered in a creepily low voice. "Where is Squirrelflight?"

I blinked back at Ashfur. "Squirrelflight?" I repeated, turning my head to look further down the stream. "Hm, well, she's certainly taking a long time to take a drink, isn't she? I wonder if she's even coming back?"

I then gave our surroundings a good scan before looking back at Ashfur, my eyes widening as I let out a gasp, pretending to be just as shocked as Ashfur would surely be in a few moments. "Oh goodness, it appears as if she's bailed on me. How rude of her!"

I took a step closer to the Dark Forest warrior, then fastening every single one of my claws into the tree we were standing on, making sure that my grip was as tight as it could be.

I then let my gaze fall on Ashfur once again, knowing that I couldn't waste one more moment. "But that doesn't matter."

Sending another prayer to StarClan for strength, I then proceeded to use all of my weight and the strong grip that I had on the log in order to completely shift it to the side. To my luck, I managed to shift it on the side opposite of mine, and Ashfur's side of the tree was yanked from its edge, causing the side that he had entered on to plummet down to the stream, landing with a splash.

Despite the tree now being completely tilted to one side, my claws managed to keep me in my same place. As soon as the log had fallen, Ashfur had lost his grip and began to fall backwards, but he quickly scrambled to his paws once again.

And sure, he was steady on his paws now, but also completely trapped.

I was blocking the only way out, which was the other side of the log that was still gripping on to its edge.

I stared back at Ashfur, trying to hold back a sneer as he glanced nervously around him, the raging stream and the waterfall flowing

just tail-lengths below him. "That doesn't matter..." I repeated. "My quarrel isn't with Squirrelflight."

I then took another step closer to the gray-speckled tom, and my eyes narrowed, a mix of rage, determination and certainty running through my blood. "My quarrel is with *you*, Ashfur," I then whispered to him, recalling the exact words that Ashfur himself had said to a certain she-cat several moons ago. "It always has been."

In that moment, Ashfur's eyes seemed to flash with horror and realization for just a moment before washing over with immense anger. "Why, you..." he growled, his gray fur beginning to bristle out. "You said 'no tricks'!"

I looked away from Ashfur to examine one of my unsheathed paws. "...Define *trick*."

"You... you idiot!" Ashfur then roared, taking a nervous glance at the high water below him every couple of heartbeats. "What happened to our deal? You realize that this means that our agreement is gone; I can still harm your family, anyone I choose, and you won't have any sort of hold on me."

I couldn't help but purr with amusement, knowing very well that Ashfur's words were a whole load of mouse-droppings. "Oh, *please!* I never believed that you were actually going to follow through with that for the smallest moment," I insisted. "You were going to manipulate the situation, and just get what *you* wanted out of it!"

I then let out an almost pleased grunt, tilting my head to the side again. "But I suppose that I can't scold you for that, though - it's what I'm doing!" I admitted before flashing Ashfur another sneer through narrowed eyes. "Squirrelflight isn't showing up, Ashfur. She was never *going* to show up." *But you thought so, which is why I was so easily able to get you here,* I thought to myself as I reflected on my plan. *Thanks to what I learned from Squirrelflight herself, I found your biggest weakness... the motivation for everything that you've done.*

In all the time that Ashfur and I had been at each other's throats, I truly don't think that I had ever seen him so angry. Shockingly enough, it didn't intimidate me in the least. "How *dare* you?!" he

barked back at me. "And you make *me* out to be a fox-heart?!"

"I most certainly do, because your motivations are horrible, selfish, and petty," I replied confidently, trying to *thrive* off of Ashfur's rage rather than be intimidated by it. "You were here to get something that you never even deserved in the first place, and *I'm* here because you've messed with my Clanmates and my family countless times over."

I then nodded to the racing water below us. "And I think you deserve to be a little deceived after all that you've put me through; after all that you've put so many cats through," I murmured, then letting out a snort. "Actually, you *more* than deserve it!"

The more that I had spoken, the more that my focus on my plan and the situation was beginning to falter as grief began to take over. So, I took a deep breath before speaking again, ready to continue to execute what had been swirling in my head for days and days now. "But even so, I'm not here to kill you, as easy as it could be to do right now."

I then sat down on the log, simultaneously making sure that Ashfur still had no way to get past me. "I'm simply here to give you a *new* proposition," I went on. I then began to flit my eyes around our surroundings - the cliffs that now towered over us, the stream below, the rocks that jutted out from the water, and the reeds that shivered with the softest breeze. "I just thought that I'd make it all a little *fun*."

I then narrowed my eyes back at Ashfur, first using my tail to gesture towards myself, and then to the log. "Does this setting look somewhat familiar to you, Ashfur?"

Ashfur didn't say so, but the knowingness in his blue eyes was clear. Instead, he murmured through gritted teeth, "What do you want, Lilypetal?"

"I was actually just about to ask you a similar question!" I exclaimed, feigning excitement as I raised my tail in the air. "You see, I brought you here to give you a choice, Ashfur."

I then reflected on the advice my brother had given me just days ago - the advice that had partly prompted this entire scheme. *I'd give them a chance to show remorse; to promise that they'd changed.* Oreo's words now ran through my head. *Obviously, this cat was very hurt by what I'd done to them, and felt that revenge was the only way to reflect that...*

Still keeping my firm on the log, I wrapped my tail around my paws. "I've given you the list before, and I'm sure that the list loops over and over in your head constantly - you know how much harm you've brought to my Clanmates," I went on. "I've always assumed that I'd never see the end of it, and that killing you would be the only way to make that happen."

"Then why don't you?" Ashfur challenged, a slight glint of amusement and mischief in his eyes. "Are you too scared to even try?"

"Of course I am," I admitted, then remembering my own daughter's words about Snowstorm from our last meeting. "But many times, determination and willingness overshadows any lack of courage."

Next, my thoughts went to the kittypet flashbacks that I'd been having for the past few moons. In one of them, I had witnessed warriors showing mercy to even the most untrustworthy cats. "And I'm also not like you. I am a warrior - I don't need to kill to win my battles."

I then further advanced on Ashfur, so that he was only a couple of pawsteps from where the log stuck into the water. "Which is why I'm going to give you a couple of choices, Ashfur," I then meowed.

I then leaned close to Ashfur, staring deep into his gaze through challenging narrowed eyes. "We can make this easy - you can swear that you're never, *ever* going to lay another claw on my family, Squirrelflight, or any of my Clanmates ever again, and I'll let you go, so that you can return to the Dark Forest where you belong."

Ashfur scarcely revealed how he felt about that, and only narrowed his eyes as he stared back at me. "And if I *don't* swear to that?"

"Then I'm going to knock you off of this tree with a single swipe, and you'll plummet down into the water, landing on the sharp rocks below. Then, you'd probably drown, unless you know how to swim!" I hissed, resulting in Ashfur's eyes widening with horror and shock. "But as I said, that doesn't even have to happen, Ashfur."

I then had to take a deep breath and look away for a moment, my next words being a little forced. "I'm willing to give you a chance to change, as much as you may not deserve it."

I glanced back at Ashfur, and was bewildered to see that he actually looked somewhat conflicted - he was shifting uncomfortably in his spot, and he was staring down at the ground. "If I 'don't deserve it', as you say, then why are you even considering giving me any sort of chance?"

I actually found myself trying to meet his gaze this time, my hope rising in the fact that things might not have to end, or risk being ended, so badly. "Because I've had to remind myself that revenge is never the answer, even when we believe that it may bring us the justice that we're seeking," I answered, then cocking an eyebrow at the gray-speckled tom. "If *someone* had learned that lesson a long time ago, we wouldn't be here, would we?"

I was further encouraged when Ashfur actually let out a dismissive grunt and sat down again, as if he hated the fact that my words were getting to him. "Come on, Ashfur," I meowed more lightly. "I know that you're in the Dark Forest, but that doesn't mean that you're completely doomed to ever become a better cat, to feel sorry about all that you've done." *I've seen the same thing happen to my daughter's son, and now he's an incredibly noble warrior that any cat would look up to...*

I then took yet another deep breath, and took a step *back* as I watched Ashfur close his eyes, as if he actually was contemplating everything I'd said to him. His pained expression revealed that he seemed to be in some sort of battle with his own thoughts.

At this sight, I was filled with an overwhelming amount of hope, and I wondered if Ashfur was actually going to be able to look back on his past, how his hurt had driven him to do things that his true

self, his old self, would never even think of doing.

For a moment, I actually thought that I might be able to step off of this log with a changed cat.

But my heart sank when Ashfur finally opened his blue eyes, and they blazed with just as much malice and hatred as they ever had before.

I tried to stay in place as Ashfur slowly stood up. "But what do I even have to feel sorry for, Lilypetal?" he asked me in his typical menacing tone. "Why should I want to change? I've done nothing but thrive with everything that I've done since Squirrelflight rejected me all of those moons ago, since I first was exiled from ThunderClan!"

He then took a step closer to me, his eyes narrowing. "In fact, seeing you suffer because of all of the pain I've brought upon *you* has brought *me* more satisfaction than I ever could have imagined!" he seemed to realize out loud. "Revenge did bring me the justice that I sought out."

He then used his tail to gesture to our surroundings, and he let out a sinister purr of amusement. "I've torn you down so much that you would do *anything* to put a stop to all of it!" he laughed. "You think that you can get me to change, after how much I've succeeded? *Please!*"

His dark gaze was burning so deeply into me that I was sure I was going to be burnt to a crisp within heartbeats. "You've heard many times by now that I'm nowhere near finished with you, Lilypetal. You're going to continue to live in fear..."

I then watched as his unsheathed claws dug deeper into the log, practically causing the bark to peel off from its trunk. "If you even live to see another day at all."

As I began to fill up with an overwhelming amount of dread, Oreo's words crossed my mind once again. *And who knows? Maybe they wouldn't change even if they were given the opportunity to... but I'd still take that chance.*

I had to close my eyes for a moment. *I took that chance, and Ashfur didn't take his...* I thought, trying to keep my breaths even as the reality of what I would have to do next began to set in. *So this is how it has to be.*

I slowly opened my eyes again, my gaze locking with Ashfur's as I braced myself for the fight that would hopefully end all of the suffering me and many other cats had endured for moons. *Too many moons.* "Alright," I breathed. "So be it."

Chapter 36

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Without hesitation, I jumped forward to take a swipe at Ashfur. To my dismay, the gray-speckled warrior easily dodged my claws, gripping the branch tightly as he ducked down.

I was then completely taken by surprise when Ashfur actually leaped straight at me, managing to pin me down right up against the tree. I struggled under his grip, and winced in pain from my previous battle wounds that were already beginning to open back up. Along with that, Ashfur's large claws were sinking deep into my shoulders.

I could barely stand the pain, and needed to act fast. I was able to use my hind paws to knock the Dark Forest warrior back, actually thrusting him behind me, resulting in him landing just at the edge of the log.

I forced myself to scramble back up as quickly as I could, and I turned around to see that Ashfur was now on stable, solid earth at the edge of the stream, also getting back up to his paws.

For a moment, as I watched him attempt to stand up and catch his breath, I found that I didn't feel a single bit of pain from any of my wounds, the determination and bravery rushing through my blood instead. *Keep in mind who you're doing all of this for, Lilypetal.*

I was able to run all the way up the log, leaping straight at Ashfur and bowling him over. As soon as I had him pressed into the ground, and my claws were fastened into his shoulders, I swiped him across the face, then proceeding to rake my claws across his flank.

And even though it was my mortal enemy that was beneath my grip, I still felt a twinge of guilt and regret as I lifted a paw to swipe

a blow at his neck. *I don't care who it is... having to kill any cat doesn't feel good at all.*

And unfortunately, my guilt had seemed to hold me back.

I managed to give the Dark Forest warrior a small gash that drew blood, but it hadn't been nearly as deep as it should be. Ashfur still had the strength and ability to slash one of his paws across one of my old flank wounds, causing me to wince and let out a hiss of pain.

With that, he was able to completely push me over to the side, and off of him. I fell onto my side, the pressure of the landing sending another unbearable bout of pain through my body. *It's too unbearable for me to even try and make a joke!*

As I struggled to get back up, I suddenly felt sharp teeth meet my scruff, and I no longer touched the ground anymore as I felt myself being tossed to the side.

And just within heartbeats, as I slid across the earth, I realized that my back legs weren't touching any sort of ground anymore.

I recognized with complete horror that Ashfur had attempted to toss me over the edge of the cliff, to plummet down into the water and sharp rocks just as I had hoped to do to him.

With a terrified screech, just barely managing to grab onto the ledge with my front paws. My claws were already sliding backwards, and all of my wounds were slowing causing any strength I had to ebb away.

But I still clung to the edge for dear life as I watched Ashfur slowly walk up to the cliff and look down at me with his sickeningly joyed blue eyes. "You've put up quite a fight," he observed.

I managed to reach one of my paws a little further forward, strengthening my grip in the ground in front of me just a bit. "What else am I supposed to do?" I growled up at him.

The gray-speckled tom simply shrugged as he began to pace back and forth above me. "It's quite admirable, actually. You are

definitely a cat to be admired, Lilypetal," he meowed. "I have to admit that I even admired you when you first came to the Clans. You've always had so much spirit, so much determination."

He then paused in front of me once again, and I let out another pained cry as jumped forward to sink his front claws into my paws that clung to the earth. "Too much for your own good, I'd say," he then whispered, his eyes narrowing as he stared down at me. "Considering you think that you even have a *chance* of winning against me."

As unnerving and demeaning as Ashfur's words probably should have been to me, they actually gave me all of the power and strength I needed all over again, and they actually brought me to look back on Firestar's words once again. Y*ou've always had a certain gleam of determination in your eyes, from the day that you first arrived in ThunderClan. Since then, it's seemed to grow stronger, darker and deeper with every moon. And you've grown along with it. It's always taken you forward, as determination should.*

I looked back up at Ashfur, returning his narrowed gaze. "Oh, yeah?" I yowled out, then using the spirit's grip to hoist myself up.

I then managed to give him another swipe across the face, causing him to recoil backwards. "A cat has a chance at anything as long as they have determination." *It's the reason that I found my true home, after so many cats had made fun of me for even giving another life a single thought. And it's the reason why I'm right here fighting you.*

Then, just as I was about to leap at Ashfur again, I was thrown off as he actually swerved past me, running behind me. And the next thing I knew, I found that the Dark Forest spirit had managed to leap onto my back. I felt an immense amount of pain as he raked his claws down my back.

And at first, I had absolutely no idea what to do, and I was sure that there was no hope for me at all. *I can't reach him with any of my claws!* I realized helplessly. *He has complete control right now!*

But it only took a moment for me to snap, and I realized exactly what I needed to do.

I could hardly believe it, but the frail, timid kittypet that I had once been, with the complete inability to fight was going to help me right now.

I remembered that first day that I had wandered into the ThunderClan forest, and having to defend myself from a wild cat that I had no idea how to defend myself from. Squirrelflight had landed on my back just as Ashfur was doing right now. *And I flung that she-cat off of me as quickly as the strongest cat could!*

Just as I had in my first real fight ever, I bunched up my muscles and began to whirl myself around, and Ashfur's grip was practically torn away from my pelt within heartbeats.

To my dismay, he didn't fall to the ground, and simply landed a bit awkwardly.

And also to my dismay, it didn't weaken him, it only brought him to complete outrage. He leaped at me again, and my attempts at dodging only brought me to sink lower to the ground - one of my legs giving out on me. *No, no, no!*

Ashfur was easily able to pin me down again. He banged my head against the ground, causing my vision to become spotty. He then jumped off of me, grabbed me by the scruff again, and thrusted me against the nearest tree.

And as I sank to the ground against the trunk, I felt my heart begin to sink as well, as I already knew that I was too weak to even try to get up this time.

Ashfur was going to be able to do whatever he wanted to me, and I was more than sure that there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Even my burning determination wasn't going to be enough to save me this time.

I was beginning to picture my journey to StarClan for the second time that night, and the third time in my entire life, as I watched Ashfur creep up to me, his eyes blazing with his own sick kind of determination.

"You know, Lilypetal? I still very vividly remember the day that I stood at the border of the Dark Forest, staring back at you from where you stood in StarClan," the Dark Forest spirit began. "You were now convinced that you had died, and had come to StarClan for good. I remember seeing that immense pain in your eyes as you thought about all that you had left behind - your mate, your kits, your Clanmates... I was watching you truly suffer right there in front of me."

He then let out somewhat weak, menacing purr of amusement. "And I've wanted to bring you suffering so long, which is the funny thing," he went on, shaking his head slowly. "Originally, I thought that taking away everything that you cared about would be the obvious way to do it..."

He then loomed over me, and I could clearly see the horrible, horrible certainty in his eyes. "But this is much, much better," he purred. "Taking *you* away from everything that you care about? That easily brings an amount of suffering that not many cats can bear."

I then winced feebly, bracing myself as Ashfur lifted an unsheathed paw. *Goodbye, Thornclaw, Goldenshine, Oreo, Emberpaw, Wrenpaw, and Lightningpaw...* I thought, feeling my eyes begin to well up with overwhelming emotion. *Goodbye, Firestar, Squirrelflight, Brambleclaw, Whitewing, all of my friends...*

I then cringed back even more as Ashfur took a step closer to me, surely about to perform the killing blow that countless cats had in the past at any moment. *Goodbye, ThunderClan...*

I then heard Ashfur's unnerving chuckle. "Who knew that it'd be as easy as this?"

"Not that easy. Not on my watch."

With the new voice that echoed through the forest, time seemed to stop. Above me, Ashfur completely froze, his eyes widening with the pawsteps that rustled the grass just behind him.

I just barely managed to peer past the gray-speckled tom to see

another figure emerging from the distance. And despite this cat's small, lean and delicate shape, Ashfur's fur bristled with as much intimidation as it would with the largest, strongest warrior in the forest.

My curiosity at who this cat could possibly be only lasted a moment, and was quickly replaced with shock as I soon recognized the white pelt and blue eyes of Snowstorm emerging from the darkness. She didn't look afraid at all, and stared back at Ashfur with dark, narrowed eyes.

I looked back at the younger she-cat in awe as I quickly realized that Snowstorm most definitely wasn't here by accident.

I could practically sense Ashfur's disbelief and astonishment from where I lied behind him. "You!" he roared at Snowstorm before lashing his tail back towards me. "Get out of here, before you end up next to her."

Snowstorm simply shook her head. "I'm afraid that I can't, Ashfur," she meowed, her blue eyes glowing with certainty. "I hate to break this to you once again, but I'm sort of *meant* to be here."

The white she-cat then let her claws slide out of their sheathes, and she began to slowly pad closer to Ashfur. "But this time, I know why," she went on. "Lilypetal has done her part, but now it's my turn to deal with you. Getting Swiftflight away from all of your antics was only a part of doing that."

Although Ashfur was trying to appear brave and unaffected by Snowstorm's presence, his voice told another story. "And I am the one that is meant to call this complete foxdung!" he barked back at her, his voice cracking slightly. A weak chill then ran down my spine as he murmured, "I shred you to bits once, so who's to say that I can't easily do it again?"

Unlike Ashfur, Snowstorm actually did seem unaffected by her opponent's challenge. I then let out a hoarse gasp as the she-cat's eyes seemed to flicker like a firefly. And once the light was gone, it had seemed that her deep water-blue eyes had frozen over like ice. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. I'm not going to be the one lying

on the ground in the pouring rain this time."

I was now weak with emotion, not pain at all as Snowstorm seemed to be speaking of another cat that I knew very well, but was saying it as if she were referring to herself. *Oh my goodness...*

She then crouched down, as if she were bracing to pounce. "Snowflight's death was the beginning of all of your treachery, and she's going to be the one to put it to its end."

She then leaped at Ashfur, having no problem being able to bowl him over and pin him to the ground. I then watched in complete horror as the two cats quickly fell into a violent, blood-filled fight.

Although Snowstorm was a very strong fighter, and had been trained extra hard for this battle with Goldenshine's help, but superior fighter among the two was unfortunately still clear. I tried with all of my might to stand up again, wanting to assist the younger she-cat as soon as I could.

I had very shakily gotten back up onto my paws as Snowstorm was attempting to pin Ashfur down once again. She was staring down at him, her ice-blue eyes burning with indignation and tenacity. "You blindsided me back in the forest all of those moons ago," he muttered. "I didn't even get a chance to flee. I barely had a chance to fight, for StarClan's sake!"

She then began to shake her head slowly. "And once I was on the ground, severely wounded, realizing that you weren't going to give me any mercy, I felt so hopeless, so awful knowing that I was leaving the rest of my family to have to deal with *you*."

I then flinched as Snowstorm then gave Ashfur a light swipe across the neck, right where I had hit him earlier. "But no more!"

The blow at the neck had only seemed to affect Ashfur for the briefest moment. "In the words of the dainty little medicine cat - not on my watch."

Ashfur kicked Snowstorm back with his hind paws, causing the white she-cat to land flat on her back, knocking the breath out of

her. And as the younger warrior lied there, wheezing and searching for breath, I was horrified to see all of the wounds she already had, among all of the ones she'd brought here from the Dark Forest battle.

I then felt my stomach drop as I noticed that Ashfur was beginning to approach the she-cat once again. My panic drove me to stand up a bit more, to where I might be able to step forward.

But not in time. All I could do was watch, not being able to do a thing as Ashfur made another deep cut across Snowstorm's flank, then proceeding to hold her down with an unsheathed claw and bend his head down to bite into her neck.

That gave me all of the energy I needed to finally stand up. "No!" I cried out.

I weakly pelted ahead, and used all of the strength I had left in order to push Ashfur away from Snowstorm.

I then landed to the ground with a thump, and it suddenly felt as if every single bit of strength I'd ever possessed had suddenly been drained from my body. *That's it. That's all I can do,* I thought. *If Ashfur tries to do anything else to me... I'm...*

I then screwed my eyes shut for a moment, not being able to bear the thought. *I'm...*

Unfortunately, it looked as if Snowstorm was in a similar position. The white she-cat was panting, wincing with pain with each weak move that she made. *Is... is it really over for the both of us? Just like that?*

I then feebly shifted my head to see Ashfur's large, muscular silhouette advancing on us just a tail-length away. He was covered in blood, and I wasn't sure if it was mine and Snowstorm's, or his own. And as he got closer and closer to us, I realized that he was now heavily limping.

And just as he was about to loom over our two bodies, likely about to have some fun deciding who he wanted to finish off first, I had

never been so astonished in my entire life when Snowstorm seemed to force herself up with a paw, using the other one to take another blow at Ashfur's neck.

And she didn't miss.

I let out an almost inaudible gasp as Ashfur completely froze in place - but not by choice this time. As blood began to pour from his neck, he then let out a cry as sickening as any look I'd ever seen in his eyes, before collapsing onto the ground, appearing to have gone completely limp.

Ashfur was dead.

I was no medicine cat, but I was sure of it. *Ashfur... is dead.*

I could've stared in amazement at the gray-speckled tom's still body, trying to process the fact that it was still at all for an endless amount of time, but I forced myself to look back at Snowstorm who had fallen back to the ground as soon as she'd made the killing blow.

I was overwhelmed with relief to see that she was still alive, but her breaths were quick and shallow, and it seemed difficult for her to move with the pain of her wounds. *She... she saved my life.*

As I myself tried to cope with my current condition, I then looked out towards the forest and deeper down the stream as I heard three different sets of pawsteps becoming louder and faster as they got closer.

And soon enough, I saw three clear figures emerging from ThunderClan's side of the stream. I couldn't see their faces yet, but I felt my heart warm as I easily could recognize the figures of Thornclaw, Goldenshine, and Swiftflight heading our way. *I should have known that no matter how much I tried to convince them to stay out of it, they'd still try and come to my rescue...*

But despite the warmth in my heart that was able to rush through my body, I was still incredibly weak from what I had just endured.

I let my head fall to the ground as I continued to stare at Ashfur's

limp body.

I managed to let out a relieved sigh full of ease as my family's pawsteps became even louder, their frantic meows now audible to me. *His limp body that now represents a new beginning,* I thought. *Not just for me, but for every single cat that I care about.*

Chapter 37

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

My paws that had been slamming into the ground in a run slowly came to a stop as Goldenshine, Thornclaw, and I finally made it to the end of the stream, and I watched, a chill running down my spine as Ashfur's still, blood-covered body slowly faded into nothing.

For a moment, I didn't even take notice of Goldenshine and Thornclaw storming past me, or the two barely-moving bodies that they were urgently running up to in order to assist them.

I was practically dizzy with astonishment, and I was almost sure that what I'd just witnessed couldn't have been real.

The cat that had been in my life since I was three moons old; the cat that had probably, in a way, taught me more than my ThunderClan Clanmates had; Ashfur - my former Dark Forest mentor that had manipulated me, and had tormented so many for countless moons, *is... gone. Ashfur isn't even dead anymore. He's just... gone. There is no way that he can bother me anymore. Or any of us!*

I probably could have stood in that clearing for *days* just trying to process this fact, and it wasn't until Goldenshine waved her tail right in my face that I was pulled out of my amazement and denial, and I was able to finally break my gaze from the spot that Ashfur had vanished from.

My mother's gaze was sharp with impatience. "Do you enjoy the sight of extremely injured cats all of the sudden?"

I shook my head quickly, blinking in shock at the golden brown tabby she-cat's question. "What?"

"It just seems like you'd prefer to stare at the two bleeding cats over

there rather than *help them!*" Goldenshine hissed back at me, lashing her tail to where Snowstorm and Lilypetal were attempting to rise to their paws.

Before I could even attempt to apologize, my mother then whipped herself back around, and she quickly ran over towards Snowstorm. "Come on, we need to get Lilypetal and Snowstorm to Leafpool and Jayfeather, pronto!"

Goldenshine's words had been more than enough to get me to snap out of my daze, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with urgency as I followed just behind her.

Beside where Snowstorm was lying, Thornclaw was already gently trying to help Lilypetal to stand up. Luckily, it seemed as if the tabby-and-white she-cat was somewhat able to stand up on her own, but she still leaned into Thornclaw, her breaths shallow as she finally stood up on all four of her paws.

Goldenshine was attempting to nose Snowstorm up, and my heartbeat quickly doubled in pace as I immediately was able to see just how weak and frail my best friend looked. There was more red than white along her pelt, her eyes were nearly closed as if she were sleep-deprived, and she almost seemed too feeble to even wince at the pain of her wounds anymore.

I could barely stand to look at her for even a moment, and I quickly pelted forward to help Goldenshine in getting Snowstorm to stand up. With my help, we finally managed to get her up to her paws, although all four of her legs shook and trembled as if she couldn't even carry her own weight at all.

I felt absolutely terrified as I stared down at my best friend, and I wondered if she was even able to feel any sort of sense of accomplishment or triumph at what she had just done, and what had led up to this point. *Ashfur is dead,* I recalled, the thought sending a shiver through my fur each time it crossed my mind. *And Snowstorm is the reason why.*

Although it had only been just moments ago, it honestly felt like an entire *lifetime* ago that Thornclaw, Goldenshine, Snowstorm and I

had been following Ashfur's and Lilypetal's scents through the ThunderClan forest. I had been absolutely sure that Ashfur and Lilypetal, whatever they were doing, were somewhere further down the stream.

The four of us had been walking along the water that marked the border between two Clans, me and Goldenshine taking the lead, when I suddenly heard a set of pawsteps abruptly stop behind me.

I had glanced over my shoulder to see that Snowstorm, who had been trailing in the back the entire time, had stopped in her tracks. Her white fur had been bristled out, and even thought she was standing up, her eyes were closed as if she were in some gentle, light sleep.

In that moment, I wished that I could've said that I was confused, but I unfortunately likely had a pretty clear idea of what could have been going through my friend's mind, and it made my fur begin to bristle with dread.

Goldenshine and I had exchanged a nervous, mystified glance, and I then watched as my mother had slowly and warily approached the white she-cat. "Snowstorm?" Goldenshine nearly whispered.

Snowstorm hadn't answered, her eyes still closed.

This had very visibly frightened my mother, and she pressed against Thornclaw, who had run up to stand next to his daughter. "Snowstorm?" she said again, a bit louder. "Snowstorm, are you alright?"

I then had nearly flinched, my heart racing with alarm as Snowstorm's eyes flew back open. And I hadn't been sure if it had been the moonlight reflecting against her gaze, or... something else that had made her deep blue eyes seem to spark like a wildfire for a single heartbeat.

And her voice when she spoke - a voice that sounded just a bit higher and a bit softer - certainly didn't help matters. She stared straight ahead as she meowed evenly, "I'm great."

She then shook her head, then stared ahead with determined eyes. "And I have to go."

My heart had then seemed to skip a beat as she had pelted forward past Goldenshine, Thornclaw and me, not even waiting for any sort of response from any of us. "Snowstorm, where in the name of StarClan are you going?" I called out to her, not waiting a single moment to begin to chasing after her. "Come back! What are you-"

I heard another set of pawsteps rapidly approaching from behind me, and I let out an exasperated hiss as Goldenshine swerved in front of me, blocking the way. "Swiftflight, stop!" she commanded. She then slowly turned her head to look further down the stream before glancing back at me, her gaze now hard and solemn. "Let her go."

"Let her *go?*" I had growled, my claws digging into the earth with impatience. "Are you insane?"

My mother had snorted, shrugging. "Yes, but not in this instance."

I shook my head dismissively, and then took a step closer to Goldenshine, giving her a challenging look. "Don't you realize where she is heading?"

Goldenshine had given a slow nod. "Yes, I do - exactly why I let her go." She then peered past me to look back at Thornclaw, who seemed to reflect her apprehensive, yet certain gaze. She then met my gaze again. "Don't *you* realize where she is heading?"

I then began to shake my head in amazement just seeing how relaxed the two golden brown tabbies seemed to be. "Yes, but-"

"Then you'll understand that this is something that she must face on her own," Goldenshine meowed sharply.

As much as I had wanted to protest even more, I bit my sharp tongue and forced myself to trust my mother's words, as much as I didn't want to. *But Snowstorm...* I thought worriedly. *Just because she is meant to put herself in this kind of danger doesn't mean that I have to like it...*

After a few moments of complete quiet, I had flicked my ears in surprise as Goldenshine then turned away from me, beginning to walk along the stream once again. She beckoned Thornclaw and me forward with her tail. "Okay, let's go."

I didn't immediately comply, and simply stared at her as I shook my head slowly. "I don't think I've ever seen someone contradict themselves so quickly."

Goldenshine abruptly stopped and turned back around to face me. "Hey, I only meant to give Snowstorm a head start in the first place!" she called back, her eyes narrowing as they glinted with tenacity. "We may not be able to be there to help her in the midst of her mission, but that doesn't mean that we can't be there to pick her back up when she's done."

And although Goldenshine's words had probably been figurative, I hated the fact that now, Snowstorm was actually having to be picked up after the fact. *After she... fulfilled her destiny...* I realized, my stomach twisting up into a knot. *But... if she truly has fulfilled her destiny by defeating Ashfur once and for all, then... what is supposed to happen now?*

Curiosity and worry was beginning to rise inside of me as Goldenshine and I got Snowstorm to her paws. Her legs immediately began to fail her, and she leaned to the side, putting all of her weight on me.

But Goldenshine had quickly helped to balance the white she-cat, flanking her on her other side to keep her upright. "Snowstorm? Snowstorm, are you alright?" my mother whispered to my friend, her eyes wide. "Say something."

I watched, my own legs beginning to shake as Snowstorm blinked a few times, her deep, water-blue eyes glazed over. "...something?" she then croaked.

I then looked up to see that Goldenshine seemed to be frantically searching Snowstorm's gaze. "How... how do you feel?" she pressed. "Does something seem different?"

To my dismay, Snowstorm seemed too weak and exhausted to even comprehend the meaning behind Goldenshine's words. "I'd say that having bleeding gashes all over your body that weren't there before qualifies as different..." she rasped. It seemed to take a lot of her strength to do something as little as speak.

But to be honest, that wasn't what worried me for the moment, and I exchanged an anxious glance with Goldenshine. *What is going on? Does Snowstorm still have Snowflight's spirit? She doesn't seem to be aware of the fact that she ever did!* "H-how are you?" I then asked Snowstorm, having to push away those thoughts for the moment. "Will you be able to stand upright to get back to camp?"

Snowstorm leaned deeper into my flank. "I'm in pain..." she breathed. "And I'm really, really dizzy and lightheaded... but..."

She then closed her eyes, her breath quickening as she seemed to take a moment to cope with her pain. She didn't finish her words, as if she were too weak to say anymore.

I stared worriedly down at Snowstorm, then flashing Goldenshine a bewildered, confused glance. And by the look in my mother's eyes, I could easily tell that she was just as concerned and perplexed as I was. "Goldenshine, what-"

Goldenshine screwed her eyes shut, and raised her tail to silence me. "Later, Swiftflight," she muttered sharply, glancing over her shoulder to make sure that Thornclaw and Lilypetal were ready to go. "I wish that we could say that there was time to waste."

Thornclaw, who had been guiding Lilypetal with his tail wrapped around her back, let Goldenshine take her mother's weight for a moment as he then pelted to the nearest dead birch tree. "Too much time has been wasted already!"

I then watched, wide-eyed as the older warrior stood on his hind legs, pressing his forepaws into the birch tree and letting out a grunt as he pushed it over. The tree let out an earsplitting cracking noise before slowly breaking away from its stump, then proceeding to land across the stream - making a bridge for us to cross into our own territory.

Thornclaw then quickly ran back so that he could continue assisting his mate. "Come on," he barked to us, wrapping his tail around Lilypetal once again as she leaned her head into his shoulder. "This will be much quicker than walking further down the stream and wading across the water."

My heart then began to race once again as the five of us made our way towards Thornclaw's makeshift bridge. The golden brown tabby tom was helping Lilypetal step onto it first.

I blinked in surprise as the she-cat then shook her head and took a step back towards Thornclaw. "Let Snowstorm go first," she insisted weakly, twitching her tail as if to urge Goldenshine, Snowstorm and me forward.

Thornclaw looked down at his mate, his pale blue eyes wide with disbelief and anxiety. "*What?*" he nearly yowled. "Lilypetal, but-"

Lilypetal flashed her mate an urgent, anxious look, clearly just as aware as the rest of us of Snowstorm's condition, which I had to admit was worse than hers. "Please. I insist." She then weakly beckoned the three of us with her tail again. "It's okay. Go on."

Before Thornclaw could protest any more, he instead let out a sigh, looking down at Lilypetal with deeply worried eyes as she leaned back into him. The tabby-and-white she-cat gave us an urging, yet reassuring look as she watched us begin to guide Snowstorm across the log.

The task was actually quite difficult, as Snowstorm barely had any strength to hold herself up. But thank StarClan, we made it to ThunderClan's side of the border, Goldenshine and I having only have exchanged a few frustrated bickers with the challenge.

Lilypetal and Thornclaw followed just behind us, and once Thornclaw had helped his mate take her final step onto the ground, the five of us began to make our way back to camp as quickly as we possibly could, with two injured cats in our group. Goldenshine and I continued to guide Snowstorm, while Thornclaw flanked Lilypetal. I was relieved to see that she actually was somewhat walking on her own, and she just seemed to be tired and bothered by her wounds

at this point.

Snowstorm, however, was still having trouble, and she unfortunately seemed to be getting weaker and weaker the further that we went. I was almost tempted to stop before the travel took away every single piece of strength that she had left. *But what else can we do but get her back to camp, where she can actually be cared for?*

With that thought, I was filled with relief again as the camp entrance finally came into sight, meaning that Snowstorm and Lilypetal would be able to see a medicine cat within heartbeats.

But at the same time, I was filled with unease. Something didn't sit right with me.

I looked back at Goldenshine to see her staring ahead, her ears pricking. "It's quiet..." she murmured. "Really quiet. What happened?"

Thornclaw lifted his head from where he had been licking a wound on Lilypetal's ear, narrowing his pale blue eyes as he stared ahead. "Maybe the battle has finally ended."

I then heard Goldenshine gasp in excitement. "Maybe it did!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening. "And maybe we won!"

For some reason, the current circumstances clumped with Goldenshine's optimistic words still left me feeling strange and troubled. My fur was tingling with caution, and all of my senses seemed to be heightened, as if I was awaiting some presence to burst into sight. *Just how I always seemed to be when I was in the Dark Forest...* I thought, finally realizing what felt so off-putting. *They're not all gone yet.*

I looked back at Goldenshine and Thornclaw, my eyes narrowing. "I can't be so sure... about either of those things," I admitted in response to the two cats' words. With Snowstorm still leaning against me, I then led the way into camp. "Not yet, at least."

As the five of us then made our way into the clearing, I felt my eyes

slowly widen as I took in the circumstances, which were completely different than what they'd been when we'd left.

To my complete dismay, two cats - Ferncloud and Mousefur - had seemed to have joined Hollyleaf up in StarClan, and were lying close to the black she-cat's body near a fallen, moss-covered tree. *May they have a safe, smooth journey to StarClan...*

And while StarClan cats still seemed to be present, none of them, nor the living Clan cats either, were fighting, and there wasn't a single Dark Forest spirit in sight, as far as I could tell. *Is... is the battle really over?*

My gaze then shifted over to the medicine den, where many injured cats were gathered. I felt my heart sink as I immediately recognized the dark ginger pelt of my former mentor, Foxleap. The older tom was lying on his side as he was being looked over by Leafpool, and he seemed to be severely wounded.

I was no medicine cat, but I could already predict what the tom's fate would likely be, and I felt my heart beginning to feel heavy with grief. *Oh, StarClan, no...*

I then looked down at Snowstorm, who was still pressed against my side, vowing to myself that she wouldn't be in that same position. *She's going to be fine. She has to be fine, doesn't she?* I tried to convince myself. *And once she's feeling better, we'll be able to figure out what's going on when it comes to Snowflight's spirit, maybe?*

Welling up with urgency once again, I guided Snowstorm deeper into camp, Goldenshine still pressed against her on her other side.

And as the two of us began to guide Snowstorm over to where many of the injured cats were, all of my worries, anxieties, any negative feelings at all seemed to dissolve for a moment as I glanced across the camp, a certain cat instantly catching my eye.

I was overwhelmed with relief and warmth as I stared back at Cherrypaw from where she stood near the elders den. My heart practically leaped, and my stomach seemed to flutter just as it did every time I looked at her. *She's safe. Cherrypaw is back, and she's*

safe, I thought, feeling so immensely thankful that the she-cat was no longer missing, and that she didn't seem to be hurt at all. *I was so worried about her that I could barely stand it. But, now, we'll be able to...*

I then trailed off of my own thoughts, narrowing my eyes as I looked back at the ginger she-cat, observing that her amber eyes seemed to be wide with alarm. *I'll be able to...*

For a moment, I wondered what Cherrypaw could possibly be looking at in such terror, but a booming voice from the center of camp quickly silenced my concerns.

"Has it been worth it, Tigerstar? All the hate? All the death?"

I then turned towards where the voice came from, and instantly felt an overwhelming wave of horror and dread. Behind me, I heard Lilypetal let out a petrified gasp.

Firestar stood in the middle of camp, his ginger fur bristled out as he stared back at an opponent. A chill ran down my spine as I instantly recognized the dark brown tabby pelt of Tigerstar - a pelt that I hadn't seen since my Dark Forest training.

But the discomfort of seeing a cat that was associated with such a dark time in my life only lasted a moment. Instead, I stared, completely shocked by the scene in front of me, so much so that I barely felt Snowstorm's weight on me anymore.

Tigerstar's amber eyes blazed as he looked back at Firestar. "Every moment," he muttered, then proceeding to hook his claws into Firestar's shoulder, raking the ginger tom's spine with churning paws. "The moment Bluestar found you, I became nothing! I have waited all this time to have my revenge."

You didn't become nothing, Tigerstar, I thought. *You* let *yourself become nothing.*

I then continued to watch in fear as Firestar then twisted free of Tigerstar's grip, managing to slash back at him. Tigerstar ducked back and grabbed Firestar's hind paw in his teeth.

I held back an alarmed gasp as he then dragged the ThunderClan leader onto his belly, then proceeding to rear up and slam his forepaws onto Firestar's spine. "When you're dead, I can rule the Clans or kill them."

No!

I then began to frantically look back and forth between Snowstorm and the two fighting cats, having to hold back the urge to leave the white she-cat and leap into the fight. *Why is no one coming to Firestar's defense, or helping him?*

I then could just barely hear Graystripe's growl from a few fox-lengths away. "Never," the gray tom growled, crouching down as if to brace himself to leap into the battle.

But a faded, glittering large white tom held him back with his tail. "No, Graystripe," the tom meowed to the warrior. "This is Firestar's battle."

I blinked in surprise - those words sounding so similar to what Goldenshine had said to me just earlier. S*he said the same thing to me about Snowstorm, and we let her face her own destiny on her own,* I realized.

I was then filled with even more anxiety as I was reminded that Snowstorm hadn't even been showing signs that she had even done so, and she only seemed to be deteriorating. *But... what did we do wrong?*

I then forced myself to look back towards the two leaders, just in time to see that Firestar was heaving himself to his paws. His green eyes were blazing with valor and determination. "I will not die until the forest is safe from you," he hissed just before leaping at the Dark Forest warrior.

Oh, no...

I then looked over my shoulder as I heard Lilypetal let out another gasp. "Firestar, no!" she then cried, and she looked as if she wanted to pelt ahead to help her Clan leader.

But she'd only taken a couple of pawsteps when Thornclaw raced forward to intercept her. "Lilypetal," he growled sharply at his mate. "Don't you dare."

The she-cat's hazel eyes were wide with pleading and obstinacy. "But-"

Thornclaw cut off Lilypetal's words as he settled down in front of her, his pale blue eyes softer, but urging. "Please. I need you to think of yourself right now," he whispered to her, gently running his tail along her flank. "Let someone come to *your* defense for a change."

Lilypetal didn't protest anymore, and simply closed her eyes for a moment before peering past her mate to look at Firestar. Her shoulders seemed to sink with defeat as she then returned her gaze to Thornclaw.

She gave her mate a look full of sadness, wariness, and love all at the same time as she let out a sigh. "Okay," she whispered back. She then took a shaky breath, closing her eyes and leaning into Thornclaw as he began to lick at her wounds again. "Okay."

My head then jerked towards Goldenshine from where I'd been staring back at the two older cats when I heard her let out what sounded like a relieved sigh. I followed my mother's gaze to see that Jayfeather was approaching us.

I managed to feel a bit relieved as well. Not only would he be able to assist with Snowstorm's wound, *but maybe he'll have an explanation when it comes to Snowflight and her destiny!*

As the gray tabby medicine cat made his way towards us, I just briefly caught his blind eyes flashing with alarm, as if he was shocked my how injured Snowstorm was.

Goldenshine let me take all of Snowstorm's weight as she ran up to meet the medicine cat. "Jayfeather," she meowed worriedly as she walked beside him. "Jayfeather, she's-"

Jayfeather didn't seem to hear Goldenshine, and was simply staring

in horror back at Snowstorm as if he could see. "Where has she been?" she asked, referring to the white she-cat, I assumed. "What happened?"

"What *happened?*" Goldenshine exclaimed, running up to stand next to Jayfeather, her gray eyes frantic. "What happened was what we thought was *supposed* to happen, but... nothing's happened!"

Jayfeather looked back at Goldenshine from where he'd been sniffing at Snowstorm's wounds. "She..." he trailed off for a moment. "Did she-?"

"She killed Ashfur, Jayfeather. I just barely saw her give him the killing blow to the neck," Goldenshine meowed so quickly that I barely understood her. Her eyes then managed to widen even more as she shook her head in amazement. "But she's not... nothing seems to have changed!"

My mother then exchanged a nervous glance with me. "At least, we don't think-"

"No, you're right," Jayfeather murmured gravely, taking a step back from Snowstorm. "Snowflight hasn't been released yet."

I felt my fur beginning to rise with panic as Goldenshine turned on Jayfeather. "What?! But how?" she nearly cried to him. "We were so sure that... that this was right! Where did we go wrong?"

Although Jayfeather seemed just as troubled and confused as his friend, he simply narrowed his eyes. "Hold on," he muttered, then turning around to walk away. "I'm going to get her cobwebs."

Goldenshine's gaze stayed on the medicine cat as he quickly padded towards his den. "Please hurry!" she called back to him.

My mother's words had sounded fuzzy, and my mind was practically swirling as I looked down at Snowstorm, whose head was leaning on my shoulder. *What does this mean?* I thought anxiously. *The fact that Jayfeather doesn't seem sure makes this even worse. Is Snowflight's spirit just going to be trapped inside of Snowstorm forever?*

My attention was then jerked back to the fight between Firestar and Tigerstar as Firestar seemed to be rising to his paws once again, his ginger pelt now covered in scratches. "You lived like a rogue," the leader then growled, slowing lowering down into a crouch. "You can die like a rogue."

I then felt my eyes widen, and my fur prickle with fear as Firestar then flew straight at Tigerstar, bending his head forward to sink his teeth deep into the dark brown tabby's neck. He kept his grip, ignoring Tigerstar's thrashing and staggering under him.

Then, after what had felt like the longest moments of my entire life, Tigerstar finally collapsed onto the ground, and Firestar didn't let go of the warrior until he had stopped twitching and moving entirely. The ThunderClan leader let the tabby drop to the ground, straightened up, and then watched as Tigerstar's spirit faded away - another one of my worst enemies now gone.

Dovewing's voice was the first to rise above the silence. "Tigerstar has gone!" her voice had not been much louder than a whisper, yet seemed to carry just as much as the most earsplitting yowl would.

Alarm then seemed to spread through the whole camp, and I instinctively wrapped my tail protectively around Snowstorm as thunder cracked the sky, followed by lightning that directly struck the fallen beech tree that lied next to Firestar.

I then felt my mouth drop as the tree burst into flame, quickly causing smoke to spread throughout the camp, covering Firestar's ginger pelt completely. Then just as quickly as the fire had arrived, it hissed and slowly diminished as it began to rain.

The smoke vanished along with it, revealing a body lying beneath the fallen beech tree.

And my heart sank as I instantly realized who it was. *Tigerstar had faded away, so...*

"Firestar!"

I then looked to my side to see the pale ginger pelt of Sandstorm

racing ahead towards her mate's body, her emerald eyes glowing with dismay.

"Firestar?" Lilypetal's brown tabby-and-white pelt then brushed past me. "Oh, no!"

Sandstorm ran up to Firestar, and dug her nose into his ginger fur. "I told you not to waste your final life," I could just barely hear her whimper.

Brambleclaw slowly padded up to stand beside Snowstorm, putting his tail tip on Lilypetal's shoulder, who looked just as upset as if Firestar had been kin. "He didn't waste it," he gently reassured Sandstorm.

I tried to be calmed by the deputy's words myself. *He... he saved all of us. He protected and defended his Clan at the cost of his life, just as a true warrior and leader would.*

"Fire will save the Clan," Leafpool then meowed softly over by the medicine den.

I then felt my heart sink all the way to the ground as I watched Firestar's oldest friend crouch down beside the ThunderClan leader. "I would have taken your place," Graystripe meowed, "if you had let me."

"Firestar!" Dustpelt then exclaimed as he ran up to join the others. "Tell Ferncloud that I love her."

The dark brown tabby tom's words drove me to look back towards the elders den once again, where I knew that Cherrypaw still was. I felt another immense wave of sadness as I immediately could tell just how crestfallen she was. She stood tall, her tail wrapped around her paws as if she were trying to stay strong and optimistic for the other apprentices, but I knew her - her eyes revealed everything that she was truly feeling.

And I wanted more than anything to pelt across camp to comfort her, but I knew that I couldn't for the moment. *Unfortunately, right now, Snowstorm needs me a bit more,* I told myself as I then looked

down to my best friend. *I'll go and be with Cherrypaw once I'm sure that Snowstorm is being taken care of.*

I then averted my gaze back towards the camp clearing to see that cats from the other Clans were slowly beginning to make their way out of camp, giving their condolences to each ThunderClan cat that they passed.

I then turned to look back a Brambleclaw as I noticed him lift his head. "The battle is over," the deputy proclaimed. "Our victory belongs to Firestar!"

The battle is over.

I then felt another chill run down my spine, and I took a deep breath as I watched the cats of ThunderClan either lowered their heads in grief, or let out yowls of celebration and triumph for their leader. *The battle is over.*

And I'd only been able to feel the smallest bit of ease, when suddenly felt myself being pushed off of balance, and I realized that Snowstorm's weight suddenly seemed to feel much heavier.

My heart began to pound with alarm like it never had before as I glanced down at my friend, whose eyes nearly seemed lifeless now, and it seemed impossible for her to stand up anymore. "Snowstorm?" I meowed shakily.

The white she-cat didn't answer, and my heart continued to race with panic as I struggled to keep her upright. "Snowstorm, are you okay?" *Oh, no. Oh, no... StarClan, please, no!*

I then flicked my gaze upwards to see Goldenshine staring back at me, her gray eyes wide with horror. "Oh, no," she breathed. She then whipped herself around, practically flying towards the medicine den. "Jayfeather!" she then cried out. "Jayfeather, we need you right now!"

I could be absolutely sure that Jayfeather would be able to hear Goldenshine's yowl from the medicine den.

But I also could be sure that he would already be too late.

I felt dizzy with horror as Snowstorm's legs completely gave out from under her, and she collapsed, her body thumping limply against the ground.

Chapter 38

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

All I could do is stand, frozen in complete terror as I watched Snowstorm collapse onto the hard ground, the heavy thump of her body seeming to echo throughout the camp.

No...

I felt so dizzy that I was almost sure that I'd be the next to fall soon enough, and my head felt as if I had dunked into in the wildest, most violently-flowing river. *Things couldn't have gone any worse...* I thought with dismay as yowls and gasps of surprise began to spread throughout the camp.

I felt myself quickly becoming overwhelmed with panic as continued to stare at Snowstorm's still figure - her pelt that seemed to be covered with more wounds than blood, how tired and dull her closing eyes were. *What have we done?* I thought, my breaths coming in uncontrollable, quick and shallow huffs. *What have we done?*

I was practically trying to hold back a whimper as I burst ahead to meet Swiftflight, who was looking down at his friend and gently shaking her. "Snowstorm?" he cried out, his gray-blue eyes wide with horror. "Snowstorm, can you hear me? Say something!"

I ran up to stand just by my son, but my eyes stayed on the she-cat below him. "Swiftflight, is she alright?" Was the only thing that I could think to ask through my spiraling mind, even though I didn't want to accept the fact that I already knew that answer.

Swiftflight whipped his head towards me, his eyes suddenly blazing like flame. "Am I suddenly ThunderClan's medicine cat?" he hissed. And while his gaze was sharp and hostile, the immense worry beneath it was clear. "I have no idea if she's alright!"

I took a step back, my head beginning to shake slowly. "Oh my StarClan, oh my StarClan..." I breathed, my panic further continuing to consume me.

I then broke into a run once again, racing past Swiftflight and Snowstorm. "Jayfeather!"

I made a break for the medicine den, my fast pawsteps seeming to match in pace with my heartbeat, and I practically had to skid to a halt by the time that I made it to the bramble screen.

I nearly ran straight into Jayfeather, who seemed to have been on his way out. He luckily also seemed to have sensed my presence quickly, and hopped back as I burst into the den. "What's the matter now?" he muttered, and quite frankly, I wasn't sure if it was exasperation or dread that I could see in his blind eyes.

But I didn't have much time to analyze his emotions, especially when mine of alarm and distress were driving me up the den walls. "Snowstorm collapsed, Jayfeather!" I nearly cried out. "She's not moving. She's not responding!"

All I could do was stand and wait, trying to catch my breath when Jayfeather simply stared back at me, saying nothing. But I followed behind him when he suddenly turned around and padded to the back of his den, not a single word still escaping his jaws. "She seemed fine - well, as fine as she could be... just heartbeats ago!" I explained, my voice trembling.

I then sat down just a few fox-lengths behind the medicine cat as he began to dig through his stocks of herbs. "Swiftflight was keeping her upright while we waited for you to treat her," I went on, my eyelids then lowering shut, "but then she just... fell. Like a cat had just given her a sharp blow to the neck. It all happened so fast..."

I then trailed off of my own words as I began to relive the horrifying, bone-chilling experience all over again, and it all became too much to bear all over again. I held back another whimper as I took a step forward. "Jayfeather-"

Suddenly, the gray tabby tom whipped himself around, dropping

the herbs he'd been carrying in his mouth. "Goldenshine, be quiet!" he growled back at me. "I'm trying to get what I need!"

I shook my head slowly as I my shoulders sank with helplessness. "What could you bring that could possibly help her?" I meowed huskily, emotion beginning to well up in my eyes. "She's down, Jayfeather... she's *dying!*"

"And you think that you have the expertise to be able to be sure of that?" Jayfeather replied. When I attempted to answer, he took a step closer to me and rose his tail, hardening his gaze. "You don't," he hissed, his voice sharp once again. "So stop talking and let me see what I can do, for StarClan's sake!"

The medicine cat then turned around once again, and as he continued to go through his supplies, I made my attempt to stay quiet and let him concentrate. *It's a good thing that he didn't tell me to keep still as well,* I thought. *Because that would be absolutely impossible right now with how much I'm shaking.*

Clearly, by my words and actions alone, I figured that it would already be pretty clear to Jayfeather how I was feeling. But as usual, the medicine cat wasn't giving away much on his end. *What does he think about all of this? He's done nothing but deny the situation and snap at me. Is he worried or upset at all?*

My curiosity beginning to rise, I slowly and hesitantly walked up to sit next to Jayfeather, already prepared for some more harsh words to be thrown my way. "Jayfeather..." I nearly whispered. "What does this mean for-?"

Jayfeather slowly turned his head to face me, revealing dark, anxious, and somber blue eyes. "I don't know, Goldenshine," he whispered back, his voice slightly trembling. "I really don't."

It quickly became clear to me that the medicine cat was just as troubled and saddened as I was, which managed to make the situation seem even more frightening. "Have... have we been wrong this entire time?" I then forced out.

Jayfeather then closed his eyes for a few heartbeats. And after a

long deep breath, his lids slowly opened again, his eyes glinting with obstinacy once again. "I don't want to say that yet, so I'm not going to," he meowed more loudly before grabbing his herbs and brushing past me to head towards the camp entrance. "Come on."

For a moment, my friend's words actually seemed to spark something inside of me, and the hope that everything could actually work out in our favor actually brought me to take a few pawsteps forward.

But that moment of hope and encouragement was incredibly brief as yet another troubling thought crossed my mind, and I quickly came to a stop again, lowering my head in defeat. "Jayfeather..." I murmured.

I then closed my eyes, my stomach feeling hollow with guilt. "I was the one that insisted that I guide Snowstorm through her destiny..."

I then forced myself to lift my head and look ahead at the gray tabby tom. "Is... is this all my fault?"

With my words, Jayfeather came to a stop just as he'd been about to crawl through the brambles. And to my surprise, he then turned around, running up to meet me and putting the tip of his tail on my shoulder.

His tail was trembling, and his eyes were sincere, but grim as he looked back at me. "StarClan taking Snowflight's fate into their paws is not your fault," he insisted softly. "You did everything that you should have."

I looked away from Jayfeather and screwed my eyes shut. "But... everything still wasn't enough, was it?"

I looked back at Jayfeather as I heard him let out a sigh. "If we really were wrong about this, then we'll figure it out," he then breathed after a few heartbeats.

He then rose a single eyebrow back at me, giving a lash of his tail. "And this time, I really mean that *we'll* figure it out," he muttered more sharply, but I found that his gaze was more warm and teasing

than harsh and bitter. "I'm not letting your stubborn mouse-brain have a choice on the matter."

I managed to feel the smallest twinge of affection at the medicine cat's words, and I rolled my eyes, giving him a small nod. *He definitely doesn't need to fight it anymore,* I thought. *No way am I ever going to figure out something like this without his help ever again.*

I then watched as Jayfeather then seemed to look back towards the medicine den entrance. His blind eyes then shut again, screwing up with pain as if a cat had just scratched him across the flank.

But after a moment, he opened them again and proceeded to make his way forward a second time. "But I'm praying to StarClan that we won't have to figure out anything," he called back to me. "Let's go."

This time, I actually did follow Jayfeather all the way out of the medicine den, and I tried to push down all of the anxiety and dread that was threatening to rise up inside of me all over again. *Even if this had nothing to do with Snowflight, I'd still hate to see a Clanmate like this... Hollyleaf's and Firestar's deaths have already been difficult enough!* I thought gravely. I had already been shaken greatly by the ThunderClan leader's death, and the loss of one of my closest friends, but StarClan had decided to grace me with even more distress and pain.

I burst out into the open to see that many cats had begun to gather around Snowstorm, their eyes wide with surprise, and their fur bristling with panic. Poppyfrost, Snowstorm's foster mother, was just next to the white she-cat, her head bent down so that she could lap at her head. Swiftflight was just next to the tortoiseshell, and my heart broke just at seeing my son look so crestfallen.

Lilypetal and Thornclaw were also close by, and Icecloud and Dustystorm were just a few tail-lengths away from them. I was then a bit surprised to notice, Lightningpaw, my younger brother, pressed up against Lilypetal, his yellow eyes wide as he stared back at Snowstorm.

Jayfeather didn't seem to care one bit that so many cats were showing so much concern for their Clanmate. "Everyone, get out of

the way!" he hissed as made his way across camp from his den. "Breathing down her neck isn't going to cure her!"

He then glared at Poppyfrost and Swiftflight, who hadn't moved at all at his command. "*Everyone* includes you two!"

Both cats seemed personally offended by the medicine cat's words, but nevertheless, they both hesitantly got to their paws and stepped back, both of their eyes not leaving the white she-cat lying on the ground. The other cats that had cleared nervously watched from afar.

But despite Jayfeather having accomplished his goal of clearing everyone away, he didn't immediately go up to see to Snowstorm. He stayed exactly where he was, and he seemed to be hesitated to take even a single step forward.

I tried my best to hold myself back from barking at the medicine cat to snap out of his thoughts and get to work, because I quickly realized what the tom's actions might mean. *Maybe he's scared...* I thought curiously. *Is he hesitating to look over Snowstorm in the fear of what he might discover?*

Whatever it was, Jayfeather seemed to push through it, and finally bent down to observe Snowstorm - who, to my dismay, looked just as lifeless and limp as she had when I'd left her to go to the medicine den. I practically felt like I was going to crumble even just looking at her for a single heartbeat.

And it felt like I had already been waiting an eternity as I waited for Jayfeather to look over the younger white she-cat. A whimper was rising in my throat once again, my legs were shaking, and my pounding ears most definitely masked any sounds of movement in camp. *I can't take it... I can't take it at all...* I thought, feeling so certain that I was going to collapse myself.

I then flicked my ears, slightly startled as another tail began to wind itself around my own, and I glanced behind me, my heart managing to warm just a bit as I met Dustystorm's worried, but compassionate and sympathetic pale blue gaze.

As always, his presence made even the hardest moment I'd ever experienced seem just a bit less difficult to cope with. *And that's why he's the love of my life,* I thought as I dug my head into his fur, letting myself be comforted by the touch of my mate. *He's the most amazing, caring cat in the world. And I don't care if I had to go through a mate that ended up being a fox-heart to find him.*

I continued to lean into Dustystorm as I then looked across the clearing, concern emerging for another tom that was incredibly dear to me. *Swiftflight watched his best friend collapse at his paws...* I realized, my heart welling up with sadness as I searched for his dark gray pelt. I felt a strong urge to run up to him, wherever he was, and give him all of the support and comfort it would take to make him feel better.

But once my eyes fell on Swiftflight, I realized that he was already receiving it.

I managed to let out a weak purr as I recognized the ginger tabby pelt of Cherrypaw standing at my son's side. And while my apprentice was sitting about a tail-length from him, their tails were twinned, Swiftflight gripping Cherrypaw's tabby tail tightly.

The she-cat seemed to be giving my son his space to grieve, but was managing to support him and be there for him at the same time. *She knows him so well...* I thought. *It seems that another she-cat is going to be my son's rock from now on.*

And while the thought of my son and my apprentice growing so close managed to preoccupy me for the briefest moment, I then felt as if the ground had disappeared from beneath me once I noticed Jayfeather finally back away from Snowstorm.

And time seemed to stop as I waited for the medicine cat to speak. My mind began to spiral with all of the possible things that he could say - good things, bad things, good things that could take a turn for the worst... or bad things that could possibly be fixed?

Unfortunately, the answer came quickly, as Jayfeather's face already said it all.

I truthfully had never seen the medicine cat look so dejected in all of the time I'd known him. His blind eyes were glossed over with dismay as he seemed to be staring down at Snowstorm. "She has the faintest heartbeat..." he began as he ran a paw over the she-cat's flank. "But she's not breathing."

I then saw his gray tabby pelt ripple. "Her body is already beginning to feel cold."

And with those words, the whole entire world, and every single thought of happiness in the future seemed to physically disappear right in front of me. I was sure that every cat around me would be able to hear the crack of my heart breaking. "No..." I choked out, feeling physically weaker the more that Jayfeather's news sunk in.

I then let out a grieved cry, digging my head into Dustystorm's neck fur. "No!"

I honestly couldn't think of anything sort of experience that would match the amount of pain that I was in - the grief, heartbreak, and confusion that I felt, felt truly unmatched on all levels. *Snowstorm is dead... which can only mean that...*

I let out another whimper out loud, hardly being able to even think of the reality of what was happening. *After all of this... it's gone, and Snowflight is...* I still couldn't force out the words. *It was all wrong. All of it was wrong! And Snowstorm fought Ashfur, dying from her battle wounds for nothing! Well... we did* nothing *but send her to her death!*

I then forced myself to open my shut eyes, and I immediately glanced Jayfeather, knowing that he was going to be feeling the exact kind of defeat that I was. Despite the news that he had just delivered, he hadn't taken any action to tell cats to move her body, to prepare her for vigil... nothing at all.

He simply stood by her side as others around him mourned, not seeming to care one bit about what cats might think about him showing so much concern for Snowstorm. But, just as he had stated to me many times, his love for the spirit that Snowstorm carried was so incredibly strong, that he likely didn't even think to worry

about what others would think.

I then let out a shaky sigh, and found myself looking back at Dustystorm. I met his gaze to find that he seemed to be giving me an encouraging look, and he was using his tail to prompt me forward towards Snowstorm.

And as much as I loved the comfort and support of my mate, it didn't take much convincing for me to run forward towards the white she-cat.

As I made my way across the clearing, my tail dragging against the ground, my eyes fell on Swiftflight once again. He seemed to be holding Cherrypaw's tail even more tightly from where he stood, his eyes closed as he looked down at the ground and shook his head slowly.

But as much as I wanted to go and comfort my son, I knew him better than any other cat, and I knew that his grieving ways were very different than mine. He'd surely not want to feel crowded as he tried to come to terms with his own feelings. So, I forced down the urge, and finally settled down in front of Snowstorm, Jayfeather just beside me.

And I'd only been there for a couple of heartbeats before I heard gentle, wary footsteps just behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see that my parents, Lilypetal and Thornclaw, were walking up to join us.

And just as I had with Jayfeather and Swiftflight, just seeing their pain at the situation further made my own grow. My father's pale blue eyes were dark and solemn, while Lilypetal's hazel ones were wide with disbelief, sadness and awe.

She was shaking her head slowly as she padded up to us. "Oh, Snowstorm," she breathed as she lowered down to sit next to me, Thornclaw doing the same on her other side. "I don't understand..."

Lilypetal then turned her head to meet my gaze, and her next words came in a very low whisper. "If... if she is dead..." she began, her eyes washing over with concern and fear. "...then what about

Snowflight? Her destiny?"

My mother's words hit me like a physical blow, and I had to suppress another cry of grief and pain. Yet, my reply came in a very weak, shaky whisper in return. "We were wrong... it was all wrong," I choked out, and my words became even hoarser as I finally spoke the words that I hadn't even been able to *think* up until now. "Snowflight's spirit was relying on Snowstorm to fulfill her destiny; to do what she never could."

I then had to shut my eyes. "But her destiny must not have been what we thought it was, because..." I then weakly lashed my tail towards Snowstorm. "...and now that she's dead... it's all gone."

My gaze then fell down towards Snowstorm, and I'd only been staring at the lifeless she-cat for a heartbeat before I was ruthlessly trying to fight the emotion that was building up in my eyes once again. *Jayfeather said that we'd figure out what went wrong, but... I don't know if I'll ever have the heart to be able to continue on. Not after this.*

I then let out yet another whimper as my head fell into Snowstorm's fur. *Not after we've completely failed.* "Oh, Snowflight..." I then whispered out, this touch probably being the closest I'd ever get to be to my sister. "I am so sorry."

At this point, I was practically drowning in my own grief, guilt, and regret. *I thought that we had come so far... but have we really done nothing but go backwards?* I wondered in dismay. *All I had wanted to do was be ensured that my sister would get to fulfill what she was meant to, and to be able to go up to StarClan, as herself, peacefully...*

I then let my muzzle dig even deeper into Snowstorm's fur. *But that can't happen now, can it?*

Up until now, my entire life, and everything around me had seemed to stand frozen since Jayfeather had last spoken. So, when the medicine cat suddenly sprung up to his paws, I was actually quite startled.

I looked back at the gray tabby tom to see that, for some reason, he

was *backing away* from Snowstorm's still shape. "Jayfeather?" I whispered to him, my eyes widening with concern. "What's going on?"

Jayfeather barely acknowledged me, and his gaze was locked on Snowstorm as if he could see her clearly. "I... I don't know..." he replied after a few heartbeats, his fur beginning to bristle. "I just... I felt something."

I stood up, feeling utterly confused by his words. "You *felt* something? What do you mean, you felt something?"

I then actually felt myself feeling the smallest bit of hope again as I thought of the possibilities of what Jayfeather could've meant. "Did you feel a stronger heartbeat?" I pressed to him. "Is Snowstorm breathing again?"

For once, Jayfeather didn't seem phased by my many questions. He was way, way too caught up in this thing he had supposedly "felt", and simply shook his head dismissively. "No, no. Nothing like that," he muttered. "I... I..."

I tilted my head to the side, realizing that the medicine cat didn't seem to understand just as much as *I* didn't. *I really, really don't understand. What could he possibly feel that I wouldn't be able to see for myself?*

I then let out a nearly inaudible gasp and flicked my ears as I actually came up with an answer to that question, and the more that I stared back at Jayfeather's awestruck, completely taken-aback expression, the more that I realized that this all actually made sense to me.

I know exactly what Jayfeather is talking about.

I began to nod slowly back at the tom. "...You felt something," I whispered back to him.

It was then that I then began to recall the words that Jayfeather had said to me many moons ago, when he had described how he'd first noticed that something was different about Snowstorm; that this kit

that a ThunderClan patrol had found in the forest wasn't just any ordinary kit.

...As soon as I got close to that kit, I felt something, I began to recall. *I don't even know how to describe it. It gave me such a feeling of warmth, yet it sent a chill down my spine.*

A chill then ran down my spine, Jayfeather's exact wording coming to mind as if he'd said them to me just moments ago. *My heart began beating so fast, and as soon as I stood in front of that kit, it almost felt like there was this presence, and I almost felt something rub against my flank and lick my ear.*

My heart was beating like it never had before. But this time, not from fear, and not from dread or sadness, as Jayfeather's words echoed in my mind one last time. *It almost felt like there was this presence... this presence...*

My eyes slowly began to widen. *Could it be that...*

Before I could even open my mouth to speak to Jayfeather to see if my suspicions were right, I nearly let out frightened gasp, taking a step back when suddenly, a bright ripple ran through Snowstorm's body.

What in the name of StarClan...?

I stared back at the she-cat on the ground, hardly being able to believe what I'd just seen.

At first, I wondered if I'd just imagined it, or the moonlight had maybe just strangely reflected against her fur, but the shocked expressions of my Clanmates told a different story.

And while that had been strange enough, I had no idea what I was in for next.

I stood close to Jayfeather, my heart skipping a beat as yet another stronger, even brighter ripple brushed against Snowstorm's fur. And from there, her body then seemed to sparkle and shimmer, just as the StarClan cats' pelts were as they stood in our camp. *Is Snowstorm's spirit being separated from her body, so that she can ascend*

to StarClan?

I then frantically looked to Jayfeather beside me, and I felt a chill run down my spine just looking at his gaze, which seemed to be filled with so much awe and certainty at the same time. *He seems to know exactly what is happening.*

That expression on my friend's face, right then and there, confirmed all of the theories that had been swirling in my mind. *And I think that I do too...* I thought as Snowstorm's body then began to glow, the light growing so large that she was barely visible beneath it. Then, the light seemed to rise as high as the tallest tree in the ThunderClan forest.

But just as quickly as it had risen, it descended like a wave, and what was beneath it was revealed.

And I could hardly believe my eyes when the light completely faded, unveiling the white she-cat that stood beneath it.

And this white she-cat didn't have white ear tips or paws, but pure-white, soft-looking fur with ice-blue eyes that would be piercing in the darkest night.

Snowflight was the spirit that stood there, her white pelt shimmering like the stars.

Chapter 39

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I was completely and utterly speechless. I felt dizzy and ready to collapse all over again.

I was almost sure that my eyes were playing tricks on me, that maybe my grief at Snowstorm's death, and the loss of Snowflight's spirit was forming exactly what I wanted to see into my own head.

But just as I'd been able to see when Snowflight's spirit had first attempted to escape from Snowstorm's body just moments ago, the shocked expressions, and astonished whispers of my Clanmates around me revealed that that was not the case.

Snowflight had returned.

For several moments, all I could do was stare back at the white she-cat's figure as the bits of stars and the bright light continued to disappear from around her, and her form seemed to become less and less faded.

And because of that, I hardly heard Swiftflight's pawsteps, and only realized that he was behind me when he spoke. "Goldenshine..." he whispered to me, slowly padding up to me so that our fur brushed. "...that's not Snowstorm, is it?"

I slowly began to shake my head, my eyes welling up with emotion, and a purr beginning to rise in my throat as what was happening, this wonderful, too good to be true, thing that was happening, finally began to set in. "No, Swiftflight. It's not..." I whispered back to him, my voice thick with emotion as I then watched the spirit slowly turn around to face me.

And then, my heart seemed to physically grow as I met her gaze. "That's my sister."

Snowflight stared right back at me, looking at me with the same warm, caring look that she always did through her ice-blue eyes, despite the cold, harsh season that they reflected.

And she spoke in the same gentle, sweet voice too. "And that's my sister," she meowed, fully turning around to face me. "Hi, Goldenshine."

I actually let out a snort of amusement at Snowflight's words. "Hi? Is that all you've got?" I purred, my voice still hoarse with all of these overwhelming, immensely wonderful things that I was feeling.

I then found that I couldn't stay in my place another moment, beginning to trot forward towards Snowflight as nimbly and energetically as a kit. "Come here, you clump of fluff!"

Snowflight's blue eyes brightened, and a loud purr erupted from her throat as she burst ahead to meet me. "You don't have to tell me twice, you bossy furball!"

I then couldn't hold back the liquid that had been welling up in my eyes as I pressed my fur against my sister's, and she pressed her own head against mine. "You're here," I practically whimpered.

I then pulled away, desperate to look into my sister's eyes again. "You're actually here. I..." My voice then broke, and I found that I was too emotional to speak.

Snowflight purred with amusement, her eyes also glossed over as they glowed with affection. "Well, my goodness, my arrival must be sort of a big deal," she murmured as she continued to purr. "I don't know if I've ever seen you fall speechless!"

I let out a gasp, pretending to be offended as I gave Snowflight a light bat over the ear with a sheathed paw. "Oh, hush!" I exclaimed to her, my voice full of laughter. "All you do is fall speechless!"

The two of us then burst into laughter, the laughter then turning into emotional purrs all over again as we bent our heads together a second time.

And in that very moment, my heart was filled with so much ease

and happiness that I could barely stand it. Just as my grief and sadness from just moments had felt unmatched, this amount of joy had definitely, definitely felt like nothing I'd ever experienced before. *Snowflight and I are together once more... something that, just heartbeats ago, I thought wouldn't get to happen ever, ever again.*

I then forced myself to pull away from my sister's touch when I noticed a very familiar dark gray figure very hesitantly walking up to meet us, and I turned to see Swiftflight standing there.

His gray-blue eyes were filled with awe, but were also dark and curious. "You're Snowflight?" he murmured.

Snowflight flashed me a half-amused, half-admiring glance before looking to my son. "I am," she replied gently, dipping her head to him. "It's been a while, hasn't it, Swiftflight?"

Swiftflight's eyes slowly widened, quickly glancing at me in complete disbelief. "You... you know who I am?"

Snowflight stared lovingly back at my son, giving him another nod. "I've known you since the day you were born," she purred. "In fact, I was the one that delivered you. And I was right there beside your mother when she named you."

I then tilted my head to the side, humored and confused as my sister seemed to let out a skeptical grunt. "But even with all of that, I'm puzzled!"

"Y-you're puzzled?" Swiftflight repeated, his eyes managing to widen even more.

Snowflight gave Swiftflight a sharp nod. "Very much so," she replied. "You seem to think that I *wouldn't* know you, is the thing. Because I suppose that I have been with you much further beyond the day you were born." She then took a step closer to my son, her eyes warm. "Don't you remember that first time that the two of us played mossball together as kits? Training alongside each other as apprentices? All of our talks... that night in the Dark Forest?"

Snowflight then put the tip of her tail on Swiftflight's shoulder, her

eyes glowing with affection and warmth. "I know you, Swiftflight. I know you very well."

Swiftflight seemed to hardly believe what he'd just heard. "After all of this time..." he breathed, his head shaking slowly in astonishment as he stared back at my sister. "You've been the one that's stood beside me? You've actually been my best friend?"

"And you were mine," Snowflight whispered. "The greatest, truest friend that I could ever ask for."

Swiftflight's gray-blue eyes then seemed to wash over with immense regret and shame, and he broke his gaze from Snowflight's. "Oh, please," he muttered. "It wasn't until you pulled me out of the Dark Forest that I was able to become anything *close* to a true friend."

Snowflight touched her muzzle to my son's cheek. "But you are now, Swiftflight. That's all that matters," she meowed softly. She then looked back at me, her blue eyes full of love. "And I was glad to be apart of what could make that happen."

"Oh, Snowflight..." I whispered, returning my sister's loving glance. I found that my voice was growing hoarse and shaky all over again. "Thank you for protecting him." I then stepped forward so that I was flanking Swiftflight, and I wrapped my tail around his back. "For raising him when he wouldn't let me."

Snowflight stared back at the two of us as she slowly nodded. "It was what I was meant to do," she whispered. "And even if it hadn't been, I would have done the same thing without hesitation." She then looked specifically at Swiftflight once again, her eyes beginning to glow with admiration. "Now, you should be immensely proud of your son, Goldenshine. He's come so far, and I've been so blessed to be able to see it all."

I kept my gaze on Swiftflight, love for him rising and burning inside of me just as it did every time I laid eyes on him. "Oh, don't worry. I am," I purred softly as I ran my tail down my son's flank. Swiftflight then looked back at me, his eyes full of just as much warm as I felt as I spoke my next words. "Definitely a son worth waiting for." *I couldn't be more proud of him if I tried.*

I then nuzzled my son's head, pulling him even closer to me with my tail before looking back at my sister, my heart welling up with longing and love again. "Oh, Snowflight. You've been here with the both of us, in a way, but I've still missed you more than I could ever tell you..."

For some reason, my sister seemed to find that question confusing. "More than you could ever tell me?" she inquired, her head tilting to the side. "Are you sure?"

I exchanged an intrigued glance with Swiftflight. "What do you mean?"

I looked back at Snowflight to see her pale blue eyes blazing with fierce gratitude, and she seemed to be shaking her head in disbelief. "What you and Jayfeather did for me... to help Snowstorm fulfill my own destiny... that tells it all right there," she meowed. "You both have spent countless moons now trying to get to the bottom of all of it. You did as soon as I returned as the lost kit in the forest, and your determination hasn't wavered."

She then seemed to have to suppress a surge of emotion rising in her throat, and she gave a small shrug. "You never even thought to give up on me."

I stepped forward to lick my sister's cheek, and I stepped back to give her a warm, sincere look. "It was the least I could do, Snowflight," I replied to her, then giving a sharp nod and slightly puffing out my chest. "I always tried to stay by your side in life, and the fact that you had died wasn't going to change that!"

The two of us then shared another laugh. "Fearless and headstrong, as always, aren't you?" my sister purred, her head shaking slowly.

She then took a step back, beginning to scan her eyes around the camp, her gaze resting on certain cats as her eyes glowed with admiration. "You've grown so much - becoming a mother, a mentor, you've found true love..." She then flashed Dustystorm a warm look in greeting, which my mate nervously, but kindly returned.

Snowflight then let her gaze rest on me again. "But that obstinacy of

yours has never changed!" And after the two of us shared yet another purr of amusement, she sniffed and shook her head again. "If any cat is going to be having trouble putting their feelings into words, it's me," she then meowed more softly. "I can't even begin to describe how grateful I am."

She then stepped forward so that her nose could touch mine. "Thank you, Goldenshine," she whispered. She then stepped back, her eyes blazing with love and appreciation. "You're my hero."

Hero.

I couldn't even give a verbal reply to my sister with how touched I was by her words. I'm a hero, I thought, not even being able to imagine what little Goldenpaw would think if she had gotten to witness this very moment. *I've finally done it. I got to be the true hero that I always wanted to be...*

I then stared back at Snowflight as she gave me one last look of love. *And it was all for my sister. Who knew?*

I then watched, still hardly being able to speak as Snowflight then turned to the cat who had been completely unable to speak this entire time.

Jayfeather, the cat that was probably almost as close to Snowflight as I was, had not spoken a word since the she-cat's return. He'd simply been staring back at her, his eyes blazing with so much grief, love, relief, and sadness all at the same time, and had clearly been too overwhelmed to speak.

But a purr began to rise in his throat as Snowflight stepped towards him, gently brushing her muzzle against his. "And you..." my sister whispered warmly, then pulling away so that she could gaze into the tom's eyes. "You really meant it when you said that you'd always be there for me, didn't you?"

Jayfeather then slowly reached his tail forward to twin it with Snowflight's, and I couldn't help but take a quick, cautious glance around to make sure that no cat was seeing this.

I quickly sighed with relief, noticing that many of our Clanmates were also sharing moments with loved ones that they'd lost. ThunderClan cats, dead and alive, were scattered around the hollow, and they surely weren't giving this any attention. Even Swiftflight had wandered away to speak with Thornclaw and Lilypetal. *Phew!*

I then looked back at Jayfeather and Snowflight as I heard Jayfeather speak. "I would have given my last breath trying, Snowflight," he whispered back to her.

"I could never, ever doubt it," Snowflight then replied, her eyes gleaming with love as she tightened her grip on the gray tabby tom's tail. "Even before we... said certain things to each other, I never doubted it."

She then leaned forward to touch her muzzle to his again. "Thank you, Jayfeather." She then sighed and closed her eyes, as if she was letting herself breath in the scent of the tom she'd cared about so deeply for so long, before she knew that she'd have to leave it again soon. "Thank you so much."

Jayfeather pressed back at the touch, a purr continuing to rise in his throat. "Every single heartbeat was worth it."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as the medicine cat then pulled away, rolling his eyes and letting out a snort as he lashed his tail towards me. "At least, the heartbeats that your sister actually let me be involved."

As I feigned an offended gasp, Snowflight let out a *mrrow* of laughter and gave Jayfeather a nudge. "She's always been incredibly stubborn!" she purred. "You should know that by now!"

"I truthfully don't know how I haven't ripped her to shreds yet," Jayfeather muttered, rolling his blind eyes a second time.

Snowflight gave me a flick on the ear with her tail as she continued to purr. "I'm surprised that I never did!" she exclaimed teasingly before she took a deep breath, her gaze softening as she looked back at Jayfeather and me. "Thank you. Both of you, for all that

you've done for me," she then meowed softly.

She then seemed to flit her gaze back and forth between the two of us, her eyes glinting with admiration and thoughtfulness. "You two make a great a team."

"And your mother is going to make quite the spectacle if her long-lost daughter doesn't get her tail over here right now!"

All three of us whipped our heads in the direction of the yowl we had just heard to see Lilypetal and Thornclaw close by, their eyes full of an overwhelming amount of love and excitement as they stared back at the daughter that they had lost so many moons ago.

Snowflight and I purred at the comment that Lilypetal had made, and Snowflight then proceeded to give Jayfeather and I one last nod before pelting over to join her parents.

I followed my sister's sparkling, slender white figure for a moment, then not being able to hold back a squeal as I nudged Jayfeather on the shoulder. "Oh my StarClan, Jayfeather..." I nearly yowled out of excitement, still hardly being able to believe everything that we had just experienced. The fact that I could look at my sister's sparkling, slender white figure at *all* still felt utterly unreal.

But along with that, all of the grief, confusion and loss that we'd felt already seemed so far away. "We... we *did* it!"

"Yes," Jayfeather murmured, shifting his blind gaze towards me from where he'd been staring off at Snowflight. "We did."

"And we were prepared to spend moons and moons trying to figure out what had gone wrong, but that's not needed now!" I went on as I began to practically prance the area.

But I stopped after only a few of those, light, prancey steps, and I felt my heart beginning to sink as something occurred to me. "That's... that's not needed now. The two of us don't have to figure anything out together anymore..."

As he always did, simply by knowing me, or with his strange powers that still baffled me, Jayfeather immediately sensed my

change in mood. "What's the matter?" he asked me, his eyebrows furrowing.

I lowered my head, beginning to shift my paws back and forth. "Oh, I don't know..." I murmured, actually hesitating to vocalize what was on my mind. "It's just... trying to figure out Snowflight's destiny has definitely brought us together, you know? I've lost count of how many times we've bickered over the situation in that medicine den."

I then took another quick glance back at my sister. "Snowflight even said that we make a great team..." I went on. "But now... that's all resolved."

I then nervously looked back at Jayfeather. And honestly, as I tried to read his expression, I couldn't tell if he just didn't see the problem with what I'd said, or he truly didn't understand. "And...?" he prompted, his head tilting to the side.

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes, deciding to not bury the lede anymore. "Well, it's almost as if our whole friendship has revolved around Snowflight and solving her problem," I explained to the medicine cat.

I then looked away from Jayfeather once again. "And now that we have... I have no excuse to pester you anymore."

I then shut my eyes, bracing myself for some harsh or sarcastic comeback that would undermine or make fun of what I had just said.

But instead, there were a couple moments of complete silence until I heard Jayfeather let out a sigh. "The fact that we're best friends isn't enough of an excuse?"

I flicked my ears and felt my eyes widen as I whipped my head back towards Jayfeather. "...best friends?" I repeated. "Really?"

The gray tabby tom them let out an annoyed huff and rolled his eyes. "What? Does this come as a surprise to you?" he muttered. "You really think that I expect to just speak with you about Snowflight whenever you come into the medicine den?"

He then flicked my ear with his tail. "Sure - Snowflight was the reason that you ever began to barge into my den uninvited, meowing on in the first place, but... that doesn't mean that that's the reason why I still let you in."

I stared back at Jayfeather, my mouth dropped open as I shook my head slowly. "Why... you little softie!"

"Shut up."

"You little furball!"

"*Shut up*."

"You sweetheart!" I purred, annoyingly jabbing my tail against the medicine cat's head. "I can't believe you! He says that we're best friends!"

I then burst into laughter as Jayfeather let out a hiss, pushed my tail away with his front paws, and then began to walk away. "I don't think I've ever regretted speaking so strongly in my entire life."

I watched him go, my voice still full of laughter as I called out to him. "Oh, please!" I exclaimed. "You meant every word, and I'm going to hold you to it until the day that you join StarClan!"

I then shook my head slowly, letting out a sigh as Dustystorm padded up to sit beside me. I leaned into my mate once again, twinning his tail with my own.

The sandy gray tom looked down at me and touched his muzzle to my head. "So..." he murmured, his eyes full of humor and affection as he flicked an ear towards Snowflight, who was deep into conversation with Thornclaw and Lilypetal. "It seems that you have some explaining to do."

I then purred, leaning deeper into Dustystorm as he touched his nose to my ear and meowed teasingly, "*Hero*."

Hero.

I straightened myself up, pulling my head away from Dustystorm's

fur so that I could meet his gaze. "Oh, yes. I do!" I purred, suddenly welling up with so much pride and warmth. "Lots and lots of explaining."

Chapter 40

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

After all of these moons...

My heart felt as if it were truly blazing with warmth, longing, and happiness as I watched the radiant, glimmering, sparkling figure of my daughter, Snowflight, walking towards where Thornclaw and I stood.

Everything else seemed to completely disappear around me as I stared back at her. And although I knew that Snowflight was only a spirit, the way that she walked so gracefully, so carefree, her pale blue eyes full of warmth... she seemed just as at ease as if she were alive. For a moment, it felt as if she had never even left us.

And to see her looking so peaceful and untroubled, after seeing the end of her life that was surely filled with so much suffering... almost brings me more happiness than getting to see her. "Oh, Thornclaw..." I whispered, pressing closer to my mate and keeping my gaze on Snowflight. "Please tell me that we're not dreaming this again."

Thornclaw glanced down at me for a moment, his pale blue eyes sparkling with warmth and disbelief. "Luckily for you, I don't think that we are, Lilypetal," he whispered back to me. He then let out a purr of amazement and looked back out towards his daughter, his head shaking slowly. "But even if it was, would that make this moment feel any different?"

"I don't think that my heart would feel any less full..." I murmured, now having to blink back emotion that was welling up in my eyes. "Snowflight!"

I couldn't contain myself any longer, and raced forward so that I could press myself against my long-lost kit. And as soon as our fur

touched, a rush of warmth seemed to run through my entire body. *Oh my StarClan... what have I done to deserve to get to be so close to my kit again? After I thought that I'd never get to again...*

I pulled Snowflight closer to me with my tail, and I gently touched my muzzle to her head. "My daughter..." I choked out, hardly being able to handle my own emotions at all - ones of happiness, sadness, guilt, longing... they were all too overwhelming.

After a moment, Snowflight pulled away, and I met her warm, ice-blue gaze. "Hi, mother," she whispered.

I quickly pulled her closer to me all over again. "Oh my goodness..." I breathed, only taking a moment to pull her even closer to me. *It truly feels as if I could never hold her close enough...* "I hope that you know that I'm going to hold you like this until you physically start resisting."

Snowflight further leaned into my touch, and I could hear the purr rising in her throat. "I'm not complaining one bit," she meowed softly. I then began to twitch my whiskers as I heard her purr with amusement, and she nodded ahead. "And I assume that Thornclaw is just going to watch us from afar?"

I followed my daughter's gaze to see that sure enough, Thornclaw hadn't moved from the spot I'd left him in. He was simply staring back at us from a few fox-lengths away, his pale blue eyes glossed over.

My heart managed to feel even warmer as I realized that Thornclaw was just as overwhelmed with the sight of his daughter as I was. *I know him too well,* I thought affectionately. *His amazing, expressive eyes always give him away.* "Apparently so," I purred, flashing my mate a warm and sympathetic look as I gestured to Snowflight. "Thornclaw, are you alright? Don't you see our brave, beautiful, and kind-hearted daughter that has returned to us?"

Thornclaw sniffed, beginning to shake his head slowly. "Oh, I see her. It's just..." he then trailed off, closing his eyes and looking away for just a moment. But when he looked back, his eyes opening again, they were just as shiny and glossed-over as they were before.

"After all of this time, you're..."

He paused once again, this time, his voice breaking. "It's been so long, Snowflight," he then meowed huskily before running up to us, joining us in our embrace. "Too long."

I gave Thornclaw a lick on the cheek as soon as I felt his fur pressing against mine again, and then pulled Snowflight even closer, so that she was nestled just between the two of her parents. "Too long, indeed."

And among all of the chaos, I'm only beginning to realize that just moments ago, back in the forest... I not only was fighting Ashfur alongside Snowstorm... but my own daughter. "And you're still the amazing, selfless, and fearless she-cat that we knew you to be when you were alive," I then went on, my voice thick with emotion. "Oh, Snowflight... through Snowstorm, you..."

I trailed off for a moment, still overwhelmed by this realization. "I mean, you saved my life tonight," I finally managed to say. "You saved so many lives."

"It was my destiny," Snowflight whispered as she looked up at Thornclaw and I. "And I knew that I was going to do whatever was needed to fulfill that destiny, as soon as Bluestar gave it to me up in StarClan."

The white she-cat straightened herself up, her eyes beginning to glow with determination and love. "But it's just as I told Goldenshine - destiny or no destiny, I'd do something like that without hesitation."

"Oh, Snowflight..." I whispered as I ran my tail down my daughter's flank. "I have no doubt."

"Neither do I," Thornclaw then purred, his gaze blazing with affection as he looked at his daughter. "Great StarClan, you're making it easier and easier for us to miss you once you go up to StarClan, aren't you?" And after the three of us shared *mrrows* of laughter, my mate then began to quickly scan his eyes around the ThunderClan camp. "And speaking of Goldenshine, where is that

other firstborn of ours?"

I continued to laugh, simultaneously still trying to get used to this extreme level of happiness as I exchanged a humored glance with Thornclaw. "Mm, I had a feeling that something was missing!" I purred, quickly spotting my other daughter speaking with her mate, Dustystorm, just a little ways away. "Goldenshine!"

Goldenshine instantly whipped her head around at my call, her gray eyes narrowing down into slits as she smirked. "Hm, interesting," she murmured, turning to face the three of us. "Am I supposed to come over and join in this heart-warming embrace?"

I held back another *mrrow* of laughter as I looked back at Thornclaw, who replied to his daughter with a shrug and began to flit his eyes in every which direction. "Well, if you don't want-"

"No, no! Don't say another word!" Goldenshine quickly interrupted, and Thornclaw, Snowflight and I all purred with amusement once more as Goldenshine then pelted straight towards us, proceeding to worm her way in between Thornclaw and Snowflight. "My gosh... I'd trade away all of my knowledge as a warrior if it meant getting a moment like this!"

Snowflight snorted, giving her sister a flick on the ear. "Mm... doubtful."

The four of us then burst into laughter yet again, that laughter soon being replaced by soft purrs as the four of us stood in ThunderClan camp together, our fur pressed together as we soaked up every single heartbeat of this moment that we were being blessed with. *All four of us, together again...* I thought lovingly. *It's moments like this that remind me of why I summoned an evil demon cat and attempted to kill him.*

I then slowly lifted my head from where it had been leaning into Snowflight, and began to scan my eyes around the area once again. *But as perfect as it feels... just the four of us no longer makes this complete*, I thought, my eyes set on finding the brown tabby, black and white, and golden brown and white pelts of my second litter.

I quickly found them just a few fox-lengths ahead, and a purr began to rise in my throat all over again as I noticed that way that they seemed to be staring back at the four of us in awe, hesitating to take even one more pawstep forward.

I stared back at my kits warmly, gently beckoning them over with my tail. "Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw, Emberpaw," I meowed softly to them, flashing them a reassuring look. "It's alright. You can come over."

Wrenpaw's pale blue eyes were sharp with wariness. "Are... are you sure?"

"Who is she?" Emberpaw then whispered, nodding to Snowflight.

Goldenshine stood up, taking a step closer to her younger kin. "Wrenpaw, Emberpaw, Lightningpaw..." Goldenshine meowed as she lashed her tail towards her pure-white sister next to her. "This is Snowflight. She is my littermate."

Lightningpaw tilted his head to the side, flicking his ears. "Wait, your littermate?" he repeated, his yellow eyes widening. He then nodded to Goldenshine. "That means that she's your sister... which means that..."

Thornclaw chuckled, nodding back at his son. "Yes, Lightningpaw," he purred. "That means that she's your sister, too."

With those words, Lightningpaw suddenly looked as if some cat had told him the secret to getting all of the prey in the world. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, shaking his head in complete astonishment and then proceeding to run up to the four of us. "Whoa!"

Emberpaw looked equally as amazed. "This is Snowflight?" she meowed, her mouth gaped open in shock. "My other sister?"

She then let out an excited squeal and followed just behind her brother. "Oh my goodness, I have another sister! And she's here!" she cried out. She then skidded to a halt just in front of her older kin. "Snowflight, it's so nice to meet you! I-I heard so much about you! You were a medicine cat, and you were so kind and intelligent,

and-"

The golden brown tabby-and-white she-cat then cut herself off, shaking her head quickly. "Sorry... I'm just..." she then murmured, letting out another squeal just a heartbeat later. "Wow! I can't believe it!"

Snowflight purred with amusement as she brushed her tail against Emberpaw's shoulder. "There is no need to apologize, Emberpaw," she replied kindly to her sister. "I'm so happy to see yet another one of my kin have so much excitement and spirit."

Snowflight then briefly looked over her shoulder to give Goldenshine and me a wink. "It definitely runs in the family," she murmured.

She then looked over towards Wrenpaw, the only kit of mine who hadn't taken a step closer. "But I can also appreciate having kin with a very calm, dignified manner as well!" she then purred, dipping her head to her brown tabby brother. "It's great to see you, Wrenpaw."

For a moment, my son seemed completely and utterly surprised that Snowflight had addressed him at all; his eyes flashing with alarm for just a heartbeat. But just as quickly as they'd blazed, they softened, and Wrenpaw returned the nod to his sister. "It's great to see you too, Snowflight," he then muttered before finally running up to join the rest of us, squirming in between Emberpaw and Lightningpaw.

And just as Wrenpaw had done so, my heart almost seemed to sense it, filling up with so much warmth as if it knew what was going on. *I am with my mate, and all five of my incredible, perfect kits all at the same time,* I thought, wrapping my tail around every cat that I could. Amidst everything that has happened tonight, I can't believe that StarClan still took the time to bless me like this.

I then couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt and unease as I took a glance out towards the forest. *And as much as I hate to admit it... I don't think that this ever would have been possible if Ashfur were to still be alive.*

Luckily, a gasp from Emberpaw cut off my thoughts. "Emberpaw?" I meowed to my youngest daughter, immediately welling up with concern. "What's the matter?"

The golden brown-and-tabby she-cat was staring wide-eyed at something ahead. "It's that cat!" she exclaimed. "That fluffy gray-and-white she-cat!"

My heart nearly skipped a beat with those words, and Lightningpaw's reply to his sister was a bit fuzzy. "Fluffy gray-and-white she-cat?" he repeated after a snort. "Emberpaw, what are you meowing on about?"

"No, I'm serious! She's standing right over there!" Emberpaw insisted, lashing her tail towards something ahead. "Oh my goodness, where have I seen her before?"

"Don't either of you remember?" Wrenpaw then cut in, clearly seeing the cat that Emberpaw was referring to. "She was the one that always came to visit us in the nursery before..." He trailed off for a moment. "Well, before she saved us from drowning."

Oh my goodness...

Any more that my kits could have said were completely drowned out by how much my anxiety and shock were taking over. I couldn't even find the ability to confirm Wrenpaw's words. I found that all I could do was look ahead, utterly bewildered as I could very clearly see my mother, Mistpelt, emerging from the group of StarClan cats. The fluffy gray-and-white she-cat's eyes were burning into my own as she slowly walked towards me.

And I found that I was doing the same, something in my subconscious being stronger than all of the feelings of wariness and guilt I felt just by the sight of my mother.

But once I stood face to face with Mistpelt, I realized that I had absolutely no idea what to say. *What can I even say?* I thought in dismay, almost feeling pained by the warmth that I saw in my mother's eyes. *Up until she died, things were so sour between the two of us...*

I then had to shut my eyes and look away, feeling too ashamed to look at my mother anymore. *All because I was a little upset that she didn't tell me about Oreo...* I realized, hardly being able to handle the amount of regret and pain that jabbed at my heart. *I was told over and over that I had all the right to be upset... but I let it drag out for much too long.*

I was haunted every single day with thoughts like this, being reminded over and over about how I'd wasted too much time being angry with my own mother. *And I never got the chance to forgive her. To let her know how stupid I was being.*

And I had no idea what I could possibly say in order for her to forgive me. All I could do was stare back at Mistpelt, forcing myself to keep her gaze as I fought back immense waves of emotion.

But Mistpelt continued to stare back at me, her pale blue eyes full of love and reassurance. "Lilypetal..." she whispered to me in her, soft, gentle voice as she took a step closer to me. "It's okay."

That was enough to give me all of the words that I needed. "How can you possibly say that?" I meowed hoarsely, shaking my head slowly. "How can you possibly be so forgiving when I was so unforgiving to you?"

I then had to screw my eyes shut. "I let you fall beneath the water, knowing that your daughter still hadn't forgiven you for something that ended up being so... *petty*."

"Lilypetal, it was not at all petty."

I then opened my eyes again, flashing my mother a grim, guilty look. "Waiting to let myself forgive you for as long as I did... it was definitely petty, and so... so ridiculous of me," I admitted to my mother, giving the smallest shrug. "If anyone should be holding a grudge... it's you, Mistpelt."

My voice cracked, and nearly broke with those words. "Oh, mother," I then whimpered, lowering my head. "I am so, so sorry."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mistpelt padding up closer

to me, and she stopped as soon as I felt her fur brushing mine. She then used her tail to gently lift up my head. "Oh, Lilypetal," she sighed, her eyes glowing with sadness and sympathy. "There is nothing, nothing at all that you have to be sorry for. You did what you thought was right, and you *were* right."

I was then surprised to see that Mistpelt now seemed to be the one overcome with guilt. She broke her gaze from mine. "Me not telling you about your brother, and your father..." she then murmured as she slowly shut her eyes. "I held it all back out of my own shame for my past, but I shouldn't have."

She then opened her eyes again, revealing a gaze full of regret and shame. "I am so, so sorry too, my love."

I didn't hesitate at all with my reply. "You are more than forgiven, Mistpelt," I whispered. *I learned the hard way... the extremely hard way about what a waste of energy holding grudges is...* I realized, *a chill running down my spine. I've not only seen it in my worst enemy, but in a way, myself.*

But I quickly pushed these thoughts away, my heart practically growing as I met Mistpelt's warm gaze again, and I felt her brush her tail against my cheek. "Oh, Mistpelt, the few moons that you've been up in StarClan have felt like a lifetime..." I then meowed to her as I held back an immense wave of grief. "I needed your support and guidance now more than ever."

Mistpelt blinked back at me, raising both of her eyebrows. "But Lilypetal... you had it!"

I flicked my ears. "What?" I nearly exclaimed out of complete confusion. "How?"

I was then shocked, and even more confused to see Mistpelt shrug, her pale blue eyes glinting with amusement. "Well... firstly," she muttered as my heart began to race with anticipation, "I'll say that I suppose I have something else to apologize for."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see," Mistpelt went on, giving me a wink. "I've kind of kept you up at night lately."

With those words, I nearly let out a gasp, and I was sure that my eyes were widening to be bigger than the size of my entire face.

And Mistpelt seemed to realize that I'd quickly caught on as well, slowly beginning to nod her head as her gaze beamed with mischief. "Those dreams that you've been having for the past few moons weren't by chance, Lilypetal."

I nearly purred with amazement. "No way!" I exclaimed. *Oh my StarClan, I never would have thought... all of those flashbacks and memories...*

I then glanced over my shoulder to look back at Thornclaw, who I knew would surely also be shocked by this news. And sure enough, my mate was staring right back at me, his gaze full of disbelief as he shook his head slowly.

I then looked back at Mistpelt, still hardly able to believe all of this. "All of those dreams that I've had about my past..." I breathed. "You were the one that sent them my way?"

Mistpelt sniffed, as she looked affectionately back at me. "I'm sure you weren't completely fond of returning to your kittypet past, but... yes, I was," my mother admitted, her gaze then growing more solemn and full of concern. "After I went up to StarClan, I was finally able to realize just how much you were going through, Lilypetal. I was finally able to see the torment that you've had to endure for so long."

She then took a step closer to me so that she could run her tail along my flank. "And most of all, I was finally able to see all of the doubt within yourself, and your uncertainty of what to do about this torment you were facing," she went on. "So, I sent you those flashbacks to guide you, and to remind you of who you are, and to show you how far you've come and what you're capable of. And Lilypetal..."

My mother then trailed off for a moment, her eyes beginning to

well up with pride. "I am so proud to see how you took it all upon yourself."

"Really?" I forced out, not realizing just how much words like that from Mistpelt would mean to me until she had said them aloud. "You are?"

"I couldn't be more proud," Mistpelt replied softly. "You did exactly as I'd hoped you would. It was clear in how handled everything with Ashfur up until now."

"Wait a moment."

Before I could even come up with the words to give my mother in reply, I quickly recognized the meow of my mate, Thornclaw, and looked back to see that he was padding up to join us. "There is definitely something that I'm missing here," he muttered, stopping just beside me. "If all of these dreams were meant to guide Lilypetal through what she was facing with Ashfur..."

I then snorted, rolling my eyes as Thornclaw flashed me a teasing, yet sharp look. "...what she wouldn't let anyone else face," he went on, keeping his gaze on me. "Then something tells me that she did a lot more than just try to get him alone to kill him, hm?"

I began to shuffle my paws back and forth, shyly looking away from the golden brown tabby tom. "Just a tiny bit..."

"That's all that we could assume when you said that you were going to speak with Ashfur out in the Dark Forest!" Goldenshine then exclaimed, running up to stand beside her father. "What in the name of StarClan did you do instead?"

I took a deep breath, finally lifting my head to look back at Thornclaw and Goldenshine, and now Swiftflight, who had been curiously watching our conversation a few tail-lengths away.

Great StarClan, were these three about to receive a heck of a lot of information.

But nevertheless, I proceeded to explain to them every single component of my plan: firstly, my reasoning for going to the Dark

Forest in the first place - meeting with Ashfur so that I could propose a trade - he got Squirrelflight, and I'd receive peace of mind that he would stay away from my family.

From talking to Squirrelflight, I'd been able to confirm that she was indeed Ashfur's biggest weakness, making it incredibly easy to convince Ashfur to meet with me at all.

And just as my family had predicted, I had wanted to meet Ashfur alone so that he couldn't hurt anyone else but me. I met him by the stream, knowing very well that I could make an easy trap using one of the dead trees that stood in the area.

And I had wanted to trap him so that I would be able to actually speak with him, and he wouldn't be able to get away. Just as my dreams, and Oreo had taught me, you should always take a chance at being able to give a second chance.

"But when Ashfur refused to change... I had no choice," I went on to my family, not being able to feel a pang of guilt as I continued to recall the moment from just earlier in the night. "I had to try and kill him, before he could do any more hard, which he made it clear that he would've done had I not done a thing."

I then let out a long sigh, my long explanation finally coming to a close. "So... that's how it all went down," I finished, flashing my Clanmates a shy look. "I've known that I've wanted to do something for moons and moons now, but it just took me quite a while to figure out exactly *what* to do."

I then took a deep breath, trying to lift my chin a bit higher. "But as soon as I did, I knew that I was going to go through with it, no matter what."

As soon as I'd finished speaking, I found my gaze immediately falling on Thornclaw. I actually found myself holding back a purr as I watched him slowly shake his head, his pale blue eyes filled with amazement and love. "You are crazy," he meowed, his voice full of laughter as he padded up to nuzzle my cheek. "You are absolutely crazy!"

Hm... I thought as I nuzzled back, giving my mate a lick on the cheek. You're even crazier for putting up with me after all of this.

A purr was rumbling in Goldenshine's throat as well, and she exchanged an astonished glance with Swiftflight. "Well... I suppose it's as Mistpelt said - her craziness is what got us to this moment, and now..." My daughter then took a deep breath, her eyes blazing with excitement. "Ashfur is dead."

She then flitted her gaze back and forth between me and her littermate. "Thanks to Snowflight and to you... Ashfur is finally dead!"

Ashfur is finally dead, I thought, that realization truly and fully hitting me for the first time this entire night.

Since Snowstorm had made the killing blow on the fox-heart, I'd barely been able to give that very moment, and what it could mean for the future very much thought at all. I'd been so consumed in returning to camp, the death of ThunderClan's beloved leader, and then Snowflight's release from Snowstorm to truly let it all set it.

Ashfur is finally dead, I repeated to myself, hardly able to bear the amount of ease and joy that those words now brought me. "Yes... yes, he is..." I breathed, leaning into Thornclaw, and beckoning Goldenshine and Swiftflight closer with my tail. "Which means that you all are safe." *And I don't have to spend every moment of every day worrying about that sick mouse-brain getting to any of you anymore.*

"Wait a moment... Ashfur..." I then heard Emberpaw murmur, and I peered past Thornclaw to see Snowflight leading her three younger siblings towards the three of us. Emberpaw was flanking the white she-cat, looking up at her with a grave, concerned gaze. "He was the one that killed you all of those moons ago, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Emberpaw, he was," I replied gently to my daughter, watching warmly as Snowflight, Emberpaw, Lightningpaw and Wrenpaw joined the rest of us. "And I was going to make sure that no one else I cared about was going to have to face that same fate."

I then looked back up at Mistpelt, who was standing just in front of

us, watching us through tender eyes. "And those dreams were what finally brought me to end it all," I then whispered, love for the fluffy gray-and-white she-cat making my heart want to burst. "Oh, Mistpelt... thank you." *I've been praying for your guidance for so long, but I had no idea that I was already receiving it almost every night...*

"Of course, my love," Mistpelt replied, stepping forward so that she could touch her nose to mine. "But I can be sure that even without any guidance at all, you would've handled it all just as well - like a true warrior would. Your determination and fierce love for this Clan and your family could've taken you all the way."

Mistpelt's eyes then shifted towards the other cats clustered around me. "You all are pretty lucky to have a she-cat like Lilypetal in your lives - I hope you all know that."

Goldenshine let out a snort in response to Mistpelt's words, flashing me a teasing, affectionate glance. "Oh, we do!"

"I second that!" Snowflight chimed in.

Emberpaw then ran up to nuzzle her head into my neck fur. "Me too!"

"So do I!" Lightningpaw exclaimed. Beside him, Wrenpaw simply nodded to me, his gaze warm.

I returned my son's warm look, and then proceeded to look up at Thornclaw, whose loving eyes were glowing in the moonlight as he stared back down at me. "Hm, it's definitely occurred to me a couple of times," he purred, giving me a lick on the nose.

I was completely overwhelmed by all of the praise, and couldn't help but look away shyly. "Oh, goodness..." I breathed. "Thank you all."

I then looked back towards my family, not only determined to take the attention away from me, but genuinely show gratitude to this fantastic, loyal group of cats that StarClan had blessed me with. "And thank you all for still standing beside me through all of this... even when I stubbornly insisted that you stay back for your safety,

or was annoyingly cryptic about my plans..."

I then took a deep breath. "Thank you so much," I continued after some purrs of amusement with my words had died down. "I love you all."

I then shifted my gaze back to Mistpelt, eagerly beckoning her over with my tail. "Now that the gratitude's been spread around..." I then murmured. "Let's get Mistpelt in on this embrace!"

With my words, many of my kin around me immediately began to echo my words, excitedly looking back at Mistpelt and flicking their tails back in their direction, as if to urge her forward.

For a moment, Mistpelt looked genuinely surprised to see that she was going to be so easily welcomed, but it only took a bit of encouragement for her to run up and join us, pressing herself against my pelt, and wrapping her own tail around the kits of my second litter. *The same kits that she gave her own life for...*

"Bluestar?"

Mistpelt, Thornclaw, Goldenshine, Snowflight, Emberpaw, Lightningpaw, Wrenpaw, Swiftflight and I had only been in our loving cluster for just a moment before Brambleclaw's shocked meow echoed through the camp. *Bluestar?*

I exchanged an intrigued glance with Thornclaw before looking up to see that, sure enough, a blue-gray she-cat was making her way into the camp clearing. And although I'd never seen this she-cat before, elders' tales were enough for me to know that this was indeed the blue-gray pelt of Bluestar - one of ThunderClan's previous leaders.

I then gasped, my ears pricking as I watched many more star-flitted cats that I didn't recognize follow just behind Bluestar. The walls of the stone hollow actually began to shimmer and glow, like the pelts of these StarClan spirits, even more so with each cat that came into sight.

I then watched, speechless and completely in awe, as these cats

began to circle to body of Firestar, which still lied just below one of the camp's fallen trees. The circle that they made around the ThunderClan leader was becoming tighter and tighter.

And then, finally, just as Snowflight had from Snowstorm, Firestar stood up from his own body, following a bright, sparkling flash of light.

And was then that I realized that these StarClan cats had come to bring ThunderClan's beloved leader back to StarClan with them. *Oh, Firestar...*

"It's time to go," Bluestar then meowed, her even, commanding voice seeming to fill the entire camp.

I then shifted my gaze back to Firestar as he dipped his head to Brambleclaw, and then touched his nose to his long-time mate, Sandstorm.

And then, I felt my heart skip a beat as my gaze locked with the leader's for just a moment. And although his green eyes were filled with so much warmth, affection, and for some reason, *certainty* as he nodded to me, the gesture still filled me with so much grief.

But I tried my hardest to push it away, returning the leader's warm gaze. *Thank you. Thank you for giving me a chance all of those moons ago, letting me in to my true home, for giving me a chance, and teaching me so, so much. You truly were like a father to me.*

I was filled with sadness and awe at the same time as I then watched as Firestar began to follow the StarClan cats, who were beginning to leave the stone hollow.

Which I quickly realized meant that all of the StarClan cats were surely having to leave. *Meaning that, unfortunately, I'm going to have two more difficult goodbyes ahead of me...*

And I shifted my gaze back towards my family to see exactly what I had dreaded to see, which was Snowflight and Mistpelt already beginning to step away towards the other spirits.

I ran up to Snowflight first, immediately pressing my nose against

hers. "Oh, Snowflight..." I breathed. "I hate to have to watch you leave like this again."

I pulled away to see that my daughter's eyes reflected all of the sadness that I felt, and more. "I hate it too..." she sighed, her eyes then brightening the smallest bit. "But now, I'll be just like Mistpelt - able to be with you all of the time, now that I'm finally able to return to StarClan."

You didn't get your time in StarClan before... instead, StarClan sent you to Snowstorm, who led you to end Ashfur's treachery. She was able to conquer the storm that sparked in you when you died, and now, you can fly peacefully up into StarClan.

I then snorted, somewhat surprised by my thoughts. *Huh... Snowflight and Snowstorm... who knew that those two names together would carry so much meaning?*

I then continued to shake my head, pushing down grief as I watched Snowflight say farewell to her entire family, and just before she ran up to finally follow the StarClan cats, she paused, giving her final-final goodbyes to Goldenshine and Jayfeather, who were almost standing together to wait for her.

And while I couldn't hear most of the words that they exchanged, the ones that I could hear definitely shocked me, to say the least. And they were ones that Snowflight was saying to Jayfeather. "I'll be waiting in StarClan," she meowed softly to the medicine cat, after having touched muzzles with him.

She then began to walk away, looking lovingly and teasingly back at the gray tabby tom. "In the meantime... maybe find another apprentice to help you out!"

I couldn't help but cock a single eyebrow as I observed this encounter. *Snowflight and Jayfeather... those two have definitely always seemed very close. Closer than a mentor and apprentice would typically be,* I thought, reflecting on how I'd seen them interact when my daughter was alive, as well as when Snowflight had spoken to him in StarClan just after she'd been killed.

And as discomforting as it all was - especially the thought of my daughter *waiting* for *any* tom in StarClan, I had no time to focus on that. *Right now, I must say goodbye to my mother, and wipe away the horrible note that we last left on.*

I ran up to my mother, a purr rumbling in my throat as I dug my head into her fur. "Goodbye, Mistpelt. Thank you so, so much again," I whispered, feeling a pang of regret as I stepped back to meet her gaze. "I... it's so hard to believe that I went so long without realizing what an amazing, compassionate mother that I had. All those moons as a kittypet, were so many moons lost..." *All because one stupid Twoleg decided to be a little greedy... I lost nearly half a lifetime's worth of time with my mother.*

Mistpelt's eyes flashed with sorrow for just a moment, but quickly glowed with warmth all over again as she wound her tail around mine. "For me, it was entirely worth the wait," she purred, touching her nose to mine one last time. "Goodbye, Lilypetal."

I forced myself to stay in place as Mistpelt then slowly began to follow behind Snowflight. "I'll tell Oreo that you said hi!" I called out to her.

To my surprise, that caused Mistpelt to pause in her place and look back at me, her eyes full of amusement and mischief. "Ah, that reminds me," she purred. "Definitely keep an eye on that brother of yours."

I sniffed, twitching my whiskers as I tilted my head to the side. "Keep an eye on him? Why?"

Mistpelt shrugged, giving me a wink. "Let's just say that there's a certain she-cat across the Thunderpath that's caught his eye."

With those words, I was left amused, and quite frankly a bit surprised, but watched warmly as both Mistpelt and Snowflight ran up to join the rest of the StarClan cats.

Goodbye, you two. I could never fully express just how much you both have done for me. Thank you, and I look forward to that day that I'll see you again.

I then let out a long sigh as my gaze then shifted back towards the camp clearing, where cats were being treated, dens were being repaired, and worst of all, dead bodies were being moved to a safer place. *But, for now, I'm going to help this Clan pick itself back up, and grieve like crazy.*

Chapter 41

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

My fur was still prickling with surprise as I watched the countless amounts of StarClan cats make their way out of camp. One by one each glittering, sparkly figure crawled through the tangle of brambles, leaving their descendants alone in the living world once again.

My gaze stayed on the white pelt of Snowflight as I continued to shake my head in amazement, still hardly being able to believe the words that my long-lost kin had shared with me earlier. *You seem to think that I wouldn't know you. Don't you remember that first time that the two of us played mossball together as kits? Training alongside each other as apprentices? All of our talks... that night in the Dark Forest?*

It all sent a chill down my spine each time I thought about it again. *I don't know if I'll ever fully understand it...* I realized, glancing over my shoulder as I heard pawsteps come from behind me. *How is it that I can be so close to a cat that I've never even met?*

I then let out a sigh as I watched my mother, Goldenshine, pad up to stand at my side. Her gray eyes also seemed to be locked on her sister's lean figure. "And there she goes," she murmured, watching as Snowflight's thick, fluffy tail finally disappeared through the camp entrance. "She's finally going to be able to go to StarClan, and live a live full of the happiness and peace that she deserves."

"And I'm sure that you're at peace too," I observed, giving Goldenshine a light nudge, "after all that you and Jayfeather went through to get her to this place at all."

My mother slowly turned her head to face me, and I met her gleaming, proud gaze. "I definitely am," she whispered. "Not only is Snowflight finally able to go to StarClan, but she also fulfilled her destiny. That was made clear when she was finally set free from

Snowstorm." She then glanced over at where the gray-and-white she-cat still lied on the ground. "Finally."

But I scarcely heard her "finally" at all. My heart began to race, and my mind was swirling with many, many anxious thoughts as I set my gaze Snowstorm's limp body for the first time since Snowflight had been released. "But now that Snowflight's spirit has been released from Snowstorm's body... what is left?" I asked Goldenshine, my voice rising with worry as I spoke my thoughts aloud. "What happens to Snowstorm?"

I didn't even give my mother a chance to answer, and urgently pelted over to my friend's body, where Poppyfrost currently lied next to her. *Jayfeather and Goldenshine knew what needed to happen to release Snowflight, but what about beyond that?* I wondered anxiously as I then skidded to a halt. *Well, I'm going to attempt to find out.*

As I came to a stop, I immediately met Poppyfrost's widened, alarmed blue eyes. "Swiftflight, what in Silverpelt just happened?" the tortoiseshell pressed to me. "Why did Snowflight-"

I held back a growl and let myself dig my unsheathed claws anxiously into the ground. "Poppyfrost, I really wish that I had time to explain," I muttered to the older she-cat through gritted teeth, trying to hold my temper despite this delay, "and I'm trying with all of my power not to snap at you, because I respect you, and also because I need you to let me talk to your daughter again."

I then bent down to press my head against Snowstorm's flank. "But right now, I just need to see if..."

I then did my best to block out every single possible sound that could make its way into my ears, using all of my concentration to see if I could sense even the smallest heartbeat come from Snowstorm's chest. *Anything, anything at all...*

But to my dismay, my own heartbeat pounding in my ears was all that I could detect. I had made it clear many times tonight that I was no medicine cat, but I could be sure that Snowstorm still didn't have a pulse. *Nothing, nothing at all...*

The realization made my heart drop, and the horrible, unbearable fear that I'd felt as soon as I'd seen my friend collapse resurfaced all over again. "No..." I breathed.

I then let myself fall to the ground as I began to vigorously shake the gray-and-white she-cat. "No, no, no!" I nearly cried out. "Snowstorm? Snowstorm, please wake up!"

I desperately continued to shake Snowstorm despite receiving no reply, for some reason hoping that the movement would jerk her awake as easily as if she were only asleep. And through my distress, I blocked out anything that would keep me from doing so.

I didn't even bother to acknowledge any of the cats beginning to gather around where Snowstorm and I lied, and I didn't even look back at Goldenshine as she tried her hardest to meet my gaze.

"Swiftflight, you heard what Jayfeather told us," my mother meowed to me softly. "She's dead."

I finally whipped my head towards Goldenshine, the blood now roaring in my ears, and my heart racing even faster. "Foxdung to that!"

My mother wasn't affected by my harsh tone, and only stared back at me through wide, sympathetic eyes. "What reason would Jayfeather have to lie?" she whispered hoarsely to me, her voice revealing pain. "And now that Snowflight's spirit has left her body... she has no spirit to wake up with, either."

If Goldenshine's words were meant to calm me down, it wasn't working. They seemed too terrible to be true. *So, was Snowstorm's only purpose to carry another cat's body, just to collapse and die once the cat had done their deed?* "No!" I demanded to my mother. "That can't be right!"

I then tore my gaze from Goldenshine's to look down at Snowstorm. "Snowstorm, please, *please* wake up!" I implored to the limp she-cat.

I then lowered myself down to lie just next to her once again. *One thing that you taught me how to do was how to express my feelings, and*

that they're always the way forward... I thought, my heart beginning to feel unbearably heavy. *What else do I have left to do?* "Please, Snowstorm..." I then went on hoarsely. "Snowflight can't be all that you are! I know that it isn't."

I screwed my eyes shut as the pain I was feeling almost seemed to physically grow inside of me. "I don't know what kind of cat I'd be right now if it hadn't been for all of your help." I then let out a huff, giving the weakest shrug. "Yes, it was Snowflight's help, but... I *refuse* to believe that it's just an ancestor's spirit that's been by my side all of this time. You're so much more than that..."

I then closed my eyes. "You're my best friend," I nearly whispered, my voice becoming thicker. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

When silence and stillness continued to be my only reply, I finally let my head fall down to my chest in defeat. "Please..."

I then closed my eyes once again as I felt Goldenshine lightly touch the tip of her tail to my own shoulder. *I'm just wasting my breath, aren't I?* I thought grimly as this horrible reality began to sink in, one that was coming much, much too early in my life. *Snowstorm is dead. My best friend is dead.*

And with my best friend's death, it almost felt as if a part of me had died, too. *Throughout my whole life, through all of my ups and downs, she was a cat that never, ever fully left my side. She never gave up on me,* I reminisced as I let my tail lie on Snowstorm's shoulder. *I wouldn't be who I am today if it wasn't for her. Snowflight said that* I *was, but... Snowstorm was truly the greatest, truest friend that a cat could ask for.*

I then let out a long, pained sigh as I continued to stare down at Snowstorm, more specifically at where my tail was lying limply over her shoulder. *It's still not fully sinking in yet...* I realized, letting out the smallest snort of amusement. *It's almost like I can feel her breathing.*

I then quickly lifted my head, my ears flicking. *Wait a moment.*

I pressed my ears to the she-cat's pelt once again, and I nearly let

out a gasp. *Wait a moment,* I repeated. *I don't think I was imagining that!* I then sprung up to my paws, my heart beginning to race all over again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Goldenshine staring worriedly back at me. "Swiftflight, what's wrong?"

I practically flung my body around to face my mother. "She was breathing!" I exclaimed. I then proceeded to run back to Snowstorm's side and place a paw on her flank. I was sure that I could feel the weakest, most miniscule rise and fall there. "She was breathing. I'm sure of it!"

Beside me, Goldenshine let out a long sigh and closed her eyes. "Swiftflight..."

"I swear on my soul that she was!" I demanded, lashing my tail irritably back and forth. "I know what I felt and saw."

I then turned around to look at Poppyfrost, my heart rising with hope all over again as she padded up to stand on my other side. But to my dismay, she looked just as unconvinced as Goldenshine had - her blue eyes wide and full of sorrow. "Swiftflight, Berrynose and I have been with her since the StarClan cats left, and she hasn't shown any signs of..."

She then trailed off for a moment, wincing as a ripple ran down her tortoiseshell flank. "...of being alive."

I couldn't hold back a hiss of anger and exasperation as I whipped myself around to turn on Poppyfrost. I'd heard nothing but exactly what I didn't want to hear since I'd run up to check on Snowstorm, and I was being pushed to my limit. "And I didn't show any signs of being a good cat for most of my life, but that didn't mean that I was doomed to ever change, was I?"

But as distressed as I was, I quickly realized just how uncalled for my behavior was. I flashed Poppyfrost the briefest apologetic look and let out a frustrated huff. "I'm sorry."

I then began to pace the area, turning away from Poppyfrost's

alarmed, concerned expression. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Goldenshine quickly intercepted me, her gaze stern, but reassuring as she put the tip of her tail on my shoulder once again. "Swiftflight," she meowed sharply. "Calm down."

My feelings of remorse only lasted a moment, and I found that I had to hold back another enraged hiss. "Calm down?" I roared back at my mother. "I'm trying to tell you all that Snowstorm is breathing, and you don't believe me!"

I then felt my heart sinking with dread as I quickly scanned my eyes around the clearing, where I saw that not only Goldenshine and Poppyfrost, but many cats around me seemed alarmed, and skeptical of my words. *StarClan, no...* I thought worriedly as I realized just how familiar these expressions were. *It's the fox attack situation all over again...*

I then looked back at Goldenshine, taking a step closer to her. "You said that Jayfeather had no reason to lie about her being dead," I pressed to the golden brown tabby she-cat. "What reason would I have to lie about her being alive?"

I then narrowed my eyes back at her, lowering my voice just a bit. "At this point, what reason would I have to lie about anything?"

With my words, Goldenshine also seemed to be having to hold back a frustrated hiss. But instead, she let out an exasperated sigh and closed her eyes. "You don't..." she breathed.

When she opened her eyes again, her gaze was calmer and more sympathetic. "And it's not that we don't believe you, we just..." She then hesitated for a moment, seeming to have to think about her next words. "I know that this is hard, Swiftflight. You're losing your best friend. But it's not going to help you to live in denial."

"But I'm not living in denial!"

"Swiftflight, please!" Goldenshine nearly hissed back at me, and it was then that I noticed the glint of pain in her gray eyes. "Snowstorm *collapsed,* and Jayfeather said that she isn't breathing."

She then took a deep breath, attempting to calm herself as she took a step closer to me. "I hate seeing you like this, and it's not going to get any better if you try to convince yourself of something that isn't true."

My first impulse was to immediately refute my mother's words, just as I had already been doing profusely. "But, I-" I began, flicking my tail back towards Snowstorm.

But I quickly let it drop again as Goldenshine's words began to sink in, and I found myself feeling defeated all over again. "Well... at least I thought..."

As I lowered my head, desperately trying to fight my resurfacing grief, Goldenshine padded back up to me and wrapped her tail around my shoulders. "Come on," she meowed softly to me, turning me away from Snowstorm's body and beginning to lead me across the camp clearing. "Let's go help Dustystorm and Nightwing patch up the nursery."

She then gave me a light, affectionate nudge on the shoulder. "You'll be able to fetch plenty of brambles from the forest with those quick paws of yours."

"Quick paws? Please."

Goldenshine and I both stopped in our tracks, and I felt my heart practically skip a beat. *Was... was that who I think it was?*

I then slowly turned my head around to look over my shoulder, and was completely shocked to see that, sure enough, Snowstorm was lifting her head as she seemed to be blinking her eyes open. They looked tired and glossed over, but were also gleaming with mischief as they stared back at me. "I've beaten him in more races than I can count."

My mouth dropped open, and all of the grief and dejection I'd felt just heartbeats before suddenly evaporated like a puddle in greenleaf. "Snowstorm!" I exclaimed as I ran up to meet my friend. "No way!"

I then whipped myself back around to face Goldenshine. "Take that!" I called out to her, lifting my chin in triumph. "I was right about shrew, and I was right about this!"

My mother was staring back at me as she shook her head in amazement. "I've never been so happy to be wrong!" she purred.

She then flashed me a sharp, teasing look. "About Snowstorm, at least," she muttered. "I'm defending thrushes until the end of my days!"

Okay, you do that, I thought, love and appreciation for my mother welling up inside of me. *Be prepared to fail.*

Then, after one last affectionate was exchanged, my mother then let out an excited squeal before making a break for the medicine den. "I'll go and get Jayfeather!"

I only watched Goldenshine go for one moment before running up to meet Snowstorm, taking her weight as she attempted to stand up. "Are you alright?" I pressed to the she-cat as I watched her lie her head on my shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

To my relief, and surprise, quite frankly, Snowstorm only leaned on me for a moment before lowering down her haunches and sitting up on her own. "Well... I'm tired, my wounds sting like I've been poked by a thousand bees, and I'm incredibly sore, but..." She then let out a sigh, and met my gaze with warm, but clearly exhausted eyes. "Yes, I am alright, Swiftflight."

"Do... do you feel any different?" I pressed to her, basically desperate to know how the absence of Snowflight's spirit would affect Snowstorm, if it would at all. "Do you realize what has just happened?"

Snowstorm sniffed, and managed to lash her tail just once. "Other than me nearly being shred to bits?" she joked. But it only took a moment for her gaze and expression to grow more thoughtful and solemn. "Well... I do feel different..."

Her eyes then slowly began to widen. "And because I do... I think I

can guess what has just happened," she murmured. "I'm just as sore as I was before, but I'm not lightheaded or dizzy anymore."

She then slowly shifted her gaze to meet mine. "Has... has Snowflight...?"

"Yes, Snowstorm," I replied to my friend, slowly nodding to her. "Thanks to you, she was finally able to return to StarClan. Now she's left you to be you." I then put the tip of my tail on her shoulder. "*Just* you. You're free to find your own destiny now." *Because you are Snowstorm, and your life wasn't simply meant to complete another cat's life. And thank StarClan for that!*

I then simply watched, somewhat amused, as Snowstorm continued to try and process everything that she'd just been told. "Wow... I am, aren't I? Free..." she whispered, and I wondered if I was even supposed to hear her. "Free... that's how I feel!"

She then lifted her head and let out a relieved huff as she stared up at the star-flitted sky. "I feel so... so *free*, Swiftflight!"

I couldn't help but let out a small purr of amusement at my friend's behavior. In instances similar to this, I'd tell her that she was too weird for her own good. But instead, I simply murmured warmly, "I'm glad."

I then took a deep breath. "And you know what?" I queried to Snowstorm, tilting my head to the side as I thought about just how relieved and "released" I felt as well. "I feel very free, too." *I was never carrying another cat's spirit, but... for a while there I might as well have been carrying a pretty dark, sinister one.*

A chill then ran down my spine, and my gaze went to my paws. *There was a time that I would have considered fighting with the Dark Forest tonight,* I realized gravely.

I then looked back up at Snowstorm. *But instead, I'm here with my friends, family and Clanmates, and I wouldn't care if we won or lost as long as I was on their side.*

To my shock, and confusion, Snowstorm let out a skeptical grunt

with my words, narrowing her eyes back at me. "You do?"

"Um... yes."

"Are you sure?"

I then couldn't help but roll my eyes and let out a huff of frustration. "I think StarClan just sent me a sign - they want their cryptic, hard-to-understand phrases back."

"Oh, come on!" Snowstorm then purred, flicking one of my ears with her tail. "I agree, Swiftflight, that you have so many reasons to feel free after all of this time, but..."

She then weakly flicked her tail, gesturing to something behind me. "As far as I've been told, you have something to say to someone that will certainly make you feel even more free."

Somehow... *somehow*, probably just a shot in the dark, but I somehow knew exactly who Snowstorm was gesturing to.

I glanced over my shoulder, and my stomach immediately began to flutter as my eyes fell on the ginger tabby pelt of Cherrypaw. The apprentice was just a few tail-lengths away, and she was alone, licking at one of her wounds.

I then slowly turned back to Snowstorm, my heart's pace quickly doubling with the amount of fear I was feeling. But at the same time, I don't think I'd ever felt so sure and certain in my entire life. "I do, don't I?" I then murmured to Snowstorm.

Snowstorm purred with amusement. "Oh yeah, you do!" she exclaimed as she began to nudge my shoulder lightly with her tail. "Now go on - make all of the advice I've given you over the past few moons be worth it!"

I rolled my eyes, snorting as I rose to my paws. "Oh, please! I used some of it on you while you were lying on the ground!"

"What? You did?" Snowstorm then pressed excitedly, her eyes widening. "What did you say?"

I broke my gaze from the she-cat's and shook my tail dismissively. "Um, nothing," I muttered. *Hm... I think she'll live without knowing about the big speech that I gave to her while I was trying to shake her awake...* I thought teasingly.

Snowstorm sniffed and rolled her eyes, quickly realizing that she wouldn't get it out of me. "Hm, whatever," she murmured. And after the two of us shared a *mrrow* of laughter, she took a deep breath and flashed me a warm, encouraging look. "Good luck, my friend. Please tell me how it goes!"

How "it" goes... I thought. *"It" being something that will change my life, whatever the end result may be...* "Thank you, Snowstorm. I will," I meowed to the she-cat, my nerves rushing and spreading through my blood like a forest fire.

Then, just as I was beginning to walk away, I paused for a moment and looked back at Snowstorm. "By the way, once you've healed from your wounds - we're racing out in the forest," I called back to her, my eyes narrowing. "We'll see who *really* has quick paws."

Snowstorm was still looking back at me, her deep blue eyes affectionate and warm. "Sounds like a plan!" she purred just as Jayfeather padded up, beginning to dab cobwebs on her wounds. "Be prepared to lose, big time!"

After returning the look, I finally turned around, leaving my friend to finally be taken care of.

And now that I was sure that Snowstorm was okay, I had something else that I needed to tend to. *And among everything else, Snowstorm is also probably the reason that I've found the courage to do what I'm about to do.*

And as my eyes fell on Cherrypaw once again, I truly don't think I had ever, ever felt so nervous in my entire life. Having to fight another set of Dark Forest cats wouldn't make my head spin like this.

But I knew that I needed to do this, and seeing this amazing, courageous, beautiful she-cat in front of me further reminded me of

why. *Snowstorm and Poppyfrost even sensed it before I realized it myself...* I thought.

I then took a deep breath, and took one pawstep forward. *But now, I have realized it, and I'm going to...*

I then put that paw right where it had been before. *I'm... I'm going to...*

I then shook my head quickly, forcing that same paw forward again. *I'm going to do this.*

I then slowly begin to take several pawsteps forward, letting Snowstorm's advice echo in my head one last time. *But surely it wouldn't make you so nervous if it wasn't something... or someone, that you cared about so much?*

And I do care, I thought, my fur tingling and my heart continuing to pound as I looked back at Cherrypaw. *I care for her more than I could ever say.*

I then took one last deep breath, sure that Cherrypaw would notice me approaching her at any moment now. *Yet, here I go - about to make an attempt to say it.* "Cherrypaw?"

My heart managed to beat faster, my stomach managing to flutter even more as Cherrypaw flicked her ears, shifting her gaze to meet mine. "Swiftflight," she breathed, running up to me and pressing her muzzle to my neck fur.

I sighed, leaning into the she-cat's touch as a purr rumbled in my throat. As funny as it may sound, she managed to ease my worries about something that for which she was the cause of worry. *I suppose that's just how fantastic she is...*

After a few moments, Cherrypaw then pulled away, meeting my gaze once again with sweet, sympathetic amber eyes. "How is Snowstorm doing?"

As they always did, looking into Cherrypaw's eyes caused me to go completely blank for a few heartbeats. But eventually, I managed to force a few words out. "She's fine... she's great," I replied. "She's in a

lot of pain, but she's going to be alright."

Cherrypaw's eyes then lit up with excitement and relief. "Oh, that's absolutely wonderful! I'm so glad!" she purred. "But..."

Her expression then wiped over with concern and confusion. "What are you doing over here, speaking with me?" she then asked, tilting her head to the side. "Don't you want to make sure that she's being taken care of?"

I shook my head back at Cherrypaw. "I know that she's being taken care of - Jayfeather is with her now."

I then took yet another deep breath, keeping my gaze on Cherrypaw's in an attempt to stay calm. "Which I'm glad is the case, because... I've been meaning to speak with you."

Then, all of the sudden, I found myself pulling back on my words as I felt my stomach twist up into a nervous, panic-filled knot. "Well, you know, to check on you."

Cherrypaw clearly sensed my nerves, but to my relief, she didn't question it. "Aw, Swiftflight, that's so sweet of you," she meowed instead, her eyes glowing with appreciation and affection. "Well, I'm-"

But I quickly cut the she-cat off, shaking my head quickly as I forced myself to push past my fear all over again. "No, no, no," I then muttered rapidly. "No, it's actually more than that."

Cherrypaw tilted her head to the side as she let out a quiet purr of amusement. "What is more than what?"

"Well, I'm not here just to check on you," I finally admitted to the ginger tabby she-cat. I then shrugged and looked down at my paws. "I mean, I am here to check on you, too. I've been so anxious to see how you're doing, and I completely interrupted you when you were trying to *tell* me how you're doing, and..."

I then sighed, shaking my head slowly, seriously and genuinely questioning how Cherrypaw could have possibly fallen for a mouse-brain like me. "Great StarClan," I murmured, sniffing. "I'm already

blowing this."

Cherrypaw was looking down at me, trying to meet my gaze. "Blowing what, Swiftflight?"

I slowly lifted my head to meet Cherrypaw's gaze again. And as I looked into her eyes yet again, all of my dread and worry seemed to die as all of my feelings for this she-cat blazed and crackled in my heart yet again. *Here we go. I don't care how stupid I sound, or how weird it is going to feel, or how scared I may be.*

I then fully sat up, staring gently back into Cherrypaw's eyes as I wound my tail around hers. *I have something that I want to say to this she-cat, and I'm going to say it.* "This," I meowed softly to her.

For a moment, I simply stared into her kind, welcoming perfect eyes, before they drove me to speak even more. "Listen, Cherrypaw... I know that we've established certain things between us already," I began. "We know how much we mean to each other, but... there's something else that I really think that you should know. Something else that I've been too scared to say for a while."

"Really?" Cherrypaw whispered back to me, her amber eyes now glowing with a mix of warmth, curiosity, and a bit of concern as well. "Too scared?"

I slowly nodded back at her. "Yes, unfortunately," I admitted to her. "And I *hate* that it's taken me this long, but my stupid fears and pride always held me back. My past held me back, but..."

I then took another deep breath, tightening my grip on Cherrypaw's tail. And to my own surprise, my next words came out as a hoarse, thick whisper. "I've realized that *none* of that is worth holding onto if that means that I get you instead."

Cherrypaw continued to stare back at me, her head shaking slowly as her amber eyes glowed in the moonlight. "Oh, Swiftflight..." she breathed, her own voice soft and thick with emotion. "That is so, so sweet of you to say."

I could very easily hear my own heart pounding in my ears, but

rather than trying to calm myself down now, or try to ignore it, I simply let it carry me forward. "Well, it's true," I whispered to Cherrypaw, briefly putting one of my paws over one of hers. "You're so... you're so compassionate, and kind, and brave, and..."

I hesitated for just a moment, trying to find the right words. "And I feel so... so safe when I'm with you, if that makes sense? You're always here for me, and that means so much to me," I struggled on. "And you... you're nice to look at, and..."

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter that was followed by a sigh, and I closed my eyes as I shook my head. "Wow, I must sound like I have thistlefluff for brains right now..."

Cherrypaw let out one of her adorable laughs, proceeding to give me a quick lick on the cheek. "Thistlefluff or not, it's really precious to watch," she purred, then nuzzling my cheek with her muzzle.

And once she pulled away to meet my gaze again, I continued on. "Thanks," I purred, the she-cat's touch throwing off my thoughts for a moment once again, but I quickly threw myself back on track. "What I'm trying to say is, is that everything about you is so wonderful, Cherrypaw. I still don't think I even deserve to be seen in the same camp with a she-cat as incredible as you are."

I then shifted myself closer to Cherrypaw, our muzzles only a couple of mouse-lengths away from each other. "But either way, I still want you to know that..."

I closed my eyes, my nerves holding back once more. "That..." *Come on, Swiftflight!* "Um..."

Cherrypaw let out a small giggle, and her sweet scent wafted over me as she shifted even closer to me. "That's okay, Swiftflight," she purred softly to me. But despite her calm, sweet tone, I could see the small glint of apprehension in her own eyes. "I think... I *hope*, I know what you're trying to say, and... I l-"

I broke my grip from Cherrypaw's tail, so that I could gently brush my own across her muzzle. "No, no. I'm sorry, but you must understand that this is something that I need to say," I purred back

to Cherrypaw, flashing her a warm, yet determined gaze. "I'm not taking the easy way out of this. I want to do this right."

Then, with those words, all of my fear seemed to vanish as I lowered my tail to twin it with Cherrypaw's once again, and I stared back at her, hoping that my eyes reflected all of the feelings that were blazing in my heart.

But even if they weren't, I was about to make them known in another way. "I love you, Cherrypaw," I finally whispered to the ginger tabby she-cat in front of me. "So much."

I then watched, not even being able to feel any self-satisfaction as I nervously awaited Cherrypaw's response. But I suddenly felt that I had all of the energy and motivation to leap up to the tallest tree as I saw the warmth and deep affection that glowed in her amber eyes that reflected so beautifully in the moonlight. I could hear a soft purr beginning to rumble in her throat.

And I couldn't help but purr as well as I watched her then shyly lower her head, and begin to shift her paws back and forth. "So... you were saying what I thought you were..." she whispered, and I could hardly stand to see just how adorable she looked trying to hide just how happy she was. "In that case..."

She then looked back up at me, her eyes still glowing with the same warmth and deep affection, and something more. "Swiftflight, I love you too," she then whispered. "So much."

And with that response, I found myself at a loss for words all over again. Not from fear, apprehension, or wariness, but a level of happiness that truly took my breath away. *I love Cherrypaw - this absolutely amazing she-cat that I'm still sure that I don't deserve, and she loves me back.*

The first thing that I could think to do, with my tail still wound tightly around hers, was to close the now very small gap between our muzzles. So, I took a step forward, proceeding to press my own muzzle fiercely against Cherrypaw's and letting her warm, familiar scent flood into my nostrils once again. Then, I used one of my paws to pull Cherrypaw close, and I began to give her slow, gentle

licks on her head.

And, as usual, these gestures and feelings that were welling up inside of me felt weird, and strange, but most certainly not wrong. In fact, they felt absolutely spectacular. I suddenly felt as strong as a warrior of LionClan, as light as the most frail feather, and as happy as the birds that chirped in the forest each morning as the sun rose. *All because of a single cat,* I thought, my love for Cherrypaw burning fiercely in my heart. *And I'm going to protect and love this cat with everything that I have.*

Cherrypaw leaned into my chest as I pulled her close, a purr rumbling in her throat. "Well, I'm sure glad that that's all established," she then whispered. I then flicked my ears with curiosity as I felt her anxiously shift next to me. "And... with all of that in mind, I'm sure that you've heard by now that Molepaw and I are going to be warriors in a couple of quarter moons."

I stared affectionately down at Cherrypaw, my eyes narrowed. "I think about it all of the time," I whispered to her. "What about it?"

"Well, that would mean that we'd *both* be warriors and... I don't know..." she sighed, glancing nervously up at me. "Two warriors that love each other in the same Clan... they typically, well, when they're in the same den, they..."

She then looked down at her paws as she began to shift them back and forth. "They sometimes sleep in the same nest," she went on, causing my eyebrows to raise. "And... and sometimes they call themselves mates, but... but if you're not comfortable with that, I-"

I let out a small chuckle, nuzzling Cherrypaw's head with my muzzle. "It's really cute that you think you have to even ask, Cherrypaw," I purred to her, my gaze locking with hers again as she looked up at me. "Sounds absolutely perfect to me."

Cherrypaw stared up at me, her eyes glowing with love, before proceeding to let out a sigh and dig her head back into my fur. "I'm so glad, Swiftflight."

I sighed as well, wrapping my tail around the ginger tabby she-cat

as I lifted my head to stare up at the stars, which were slowly beginning to fade with the arrival of dawn.

And in that moment, with Cherrypaw pressed against me, my Clanmates, friends and family, surrounding me in the camp clearing, and the cats of StarClan watching me from above, I realized that I had never felt so free, and so much like myself in my entire life. *Thank you, StarClan, for giving me a chance to have so much, after I refused to have anything at all for so long. Thank you so much.*

Chapter 42

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Although the stone hollow's shadowy, dark disposition was slowly beginning to fade with the dawn light, the night crickets still chirped, and the stars of Silverpelt still sparkled brightly up in the sky as the cats of ThunderClan swarmed the camp, repaired dens, tended to their wounds, and mourned for the loved ones that they'd lost.

At this point, Ashfur's death felt like it had taken place several lifetimes ago.

My wounds had already been well-attended to, and while every single one of my scratches had stopped bleeding, having been dabbed over with cobwebs and smoothed over with a poultice, the wound that I currently had in my heart couldn't be healed by even the best of treatment.

As soon as Leafpool had told me that my poultices were all dry, I had found my paws leading me towards the small grass clearing where Firestar's body currently lied. The ThunderClan leader had been carried and placed there around the same time that Snowflight's spirit had been released from Snowstorm, and that I'd been able to speak with both my daughter, and Mistpelt. *And because of all of that excitement,* I thought, feeling my heart continue to sink as I stared down at the tom's ginger pelt, *I haven't been able to process just how much of a loss this is. Not just for the Clan, but for me.*

I'd actually felt a heartbeat of complete dismay and helplessness when the rain from the sudden thunderstorm washed away the smoke, revealing Firestar's limp body. And each time that I looked down at him now, replaying his death in my head, I felt myself having to hold back a whimper.

So, to say the least, I was incredibly saddened by Firestar's death, and I knew for sure that things would never feel the same again. *Firestar was such a special part of my journey in this Clan...* I thought, thankful that I'd been able to speak very similar words to the leader himself just a couple of days earlier. *He gave me a chance to be a warrior, he trained me to become one, and gave me endless support once I was one. And even though we both served two very different roles in this Clan, and he wasn't always physically by my side, I was always sure that he was there for me.*

I then found myself having to hold back yet another whimper. *So... just knowing that he isn't here anymore makes things feel so empty... so uncertain,* I then thought, shaking my head slowly and shutting my eyes for a moment. *Oh, Firestar... Sandstorm was right when she said that you didn't waste your final life... but that fact doesn't make this loss any easier to deal with.*

I then let out a sigh, shifting myself slightly so that I could lean against Squirrelflight, who was sitting just beside me. "It's so clear that he's led this Clan through all nine of his lives with all of the strength, grace, and wisdom that he had..." I whispered to the dark ginger she-cat. "But it still feels much too soon, doesn't it?"

Squirrelflight leaned into me, sighing just a bit more shakily. "You're telling me," she replied, her voice sounding low and tired. I then pulled my head away to look at her, and felt my heart sink just at the sight of her downcast green eyes. "He could've led this Clan for many, many moons to come, continuing to be the fantastic leader, mentor, and..."

Squirrelflight then broke off of her own words, having to take a moment to recompose herself. And once she spoke again, her voice was hoarser, and thick with emotion. "...father that he was."

I then wrapped my tail comfortingly around Squirrelflight's back as she let out a whimper and dug her head into my shoulder, and I felt her own grief almost bleeding into my own pelt. *I never even got to witness Firestar's rise to leadership... all of his influence when he first arrived in ThunderClan. I mean, I wasn't even alive then,* I realized. *I only got to see the second half of his entire life, yet I was still so amazed by his wisdom, and how easily he was able to gain my respect.*

I then screwed my eyes shut, suppressing the emotion that was welling up inside of them. *He was a truly astounding cat.* Any *cat would look up to him.*

I then looked back down at Squirrelflight, my heart beginning to fill up with sympathy as I realized how differently this loss would affect the dark ginger she-cat. *But Squirrelflight was his daughter, for StarClan's sake! I can't even imagine what she must be feeling right now...*

I forced myself to suppress my own grief for a moment, knowing very well that needed a friend right now, and not someone to mourn beside her.

I pulled the she-cat closer to me with my tail, and rested my chin on top of her head. "It's true that he could've been here for much longer, but... in a way, he still *will* be, you know?" I began, praying to StarClan that my words would bring at least a little bit of comfort. "He may not be physically with us anymore, but that doesn't mean that he isn't going to continue to stand by this Clan in any way that he can."

Funny enough, I already found that my own words were bringing me some comfort as images of my mother flashed into my mind, and I was reminded of all of the flashbacks and dreams she had sent my way to guide me, when originally I'd thought she'd completely disappeared from my life with her death.

This further encouraged me to try and comfort Squirrelflight. "StarClan cats have their ways, right?" I continued, and I felt a twinge of relief as Squirrelflight then lifted her head to meet my gaze, her green eyes still full of sadness, but also contained a sparkle of gratitude. "And when you feel that he's with you, just... know that he really is."

I then couldn't suppress a small sniff as I realized how nice it would've been to be told these words just a few moons ago. "And even if you don't feel that he is, know that he really is then, as well." *Trust me, I know that now!*

Squirrelflight began to shake her head slowly, her eyes still glowing

with gratitude as she looked back at me. "No other cat could've said it better, but..." she murmured, her head then lowering down as her eyelids slowly shut. "It's all still very, very hard."

"I know that it is," I then meowed softly to Squirrelflight, keeping my tail wrapped tightly around her back. *It's hard for me too, but I'm not going to tell you that, because that most certainly won't make you feel any better.* "But I hope that you know that I'm always here if you need to grieve, to speak your mind... whatever you need."

I then gave my friend an affectionate nudge. "And in the warriors den, of course you know that I'm just a moss nest away!"

I then felt a twinge of happiness when Squirrelflight seemed to manage the smallest purr of amusement. "Thank you, Lilypetal," she then replied. I then watched curiously as she stared back at me, and looked back towards Firestar.

She then glanced back at me, and I was surprised to see her green eyes now gleaming with mischief. "So..."

I raised my eyebrows with intrigue, slightly bewildered that the she-cat seemed to be changing the subject. "So?"

"I hope you don't mind me bringing this up, but..." Squirrelflight began, her ginger head tilting to the side as her eyes narrowed. "I can't help but notice that you've returned to camp safely..." She then began to flit her eyes around the camp clearing behind her. "And at the same time, I still haven't seen even one sigh of a certain gray-speckled pelt up until now, so..."

She then looked back at me one last time, her tail beginning to lash back and forth as her gaze flashed with wariness and uncertainty. "Have you... 'taken care of it'?"

I blinked in surprise, but began to nod my head in understanding as I realized that Squirrelflight likely wanted to take any means possible to distract herself from her grief.

And I couldn't help but snort and begin to shake my head slowly, realizing that she would receive quite the distraction with my

answer to her question. "Hm... I suppose that that's one way to put-"

"Taken care of it?"

Both Squirrelflight and I looked over our shoulders at the same time, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of nerves as I wondered who the heck I'd have to explain myself and my words to.

But I instantly felt relieved as I recognized the dark tabby pelt of Brambleclaw approaching the two of us. His amber eyes looked almost dull, revealing how tired and drained he was from tonight's events, but they still glowed with deep curiosity.

He paused just a tail-length away, sitting down and wrapping his tail over his paws. "Taken care of what?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him tilting my head as Squirrelflight and I exchanged an amused, mischievous glance. But the dark ginger she-cat's eyes quickly blazed with surprise and bewilderment as she seemed to realize that I had indeed "taken care of it", in a sense.

I flashed her one last amused, certain glance before looking back at Brambleclaw, who had a single eyebrow cocked. "Hm..." he then murmured, taking a step closer to the two of us. "This seems to be a gossip session that I'm going to have to barge into."

I took a deep breath, forcing back any anxiety that had begun to rise inside of me as I wondered whether Brambleclaw's pressing was an interrogation, or simply out of curiosity. *But either way, there's no reason for me to be nervous to share something like this, because I have no reason to hide all of it anymore,* I told myself.

I then looked back at Squirrelflight yet again, who now looked just as eager as her mate did to hear what I had to say. "And we welcome you with open paws!" I purred, giving the she-cat a reassuring look before looking back at the dark brown tabby tom before us. "Brambleclaw," I finally began. "Do you remember all those moons ago when Squirrelflight and I spoke up against Ashfur at the Gathering?"

Brambleclaw sniffed at my words. "I could never forget it," he murmured. "But what does that have to do with this thing you've 'taken care of'?"

Annnnddd, here we go again.

After another deep breath, I then proceeded to first explain to Brambleclaw what I had explained to his mate just a few moons ago - what had happened since that first confrontation at the Gathering, where Ashfur had made his attempt to ruin Squirrelflight's life, and then how my defiance against him had led to his mission of ruining mine.

Brambleclaw listened intently, though I could tell that he was immensely uneased and astonished by what I was telling him. And soon enough, Squirrelflight reflected her mate's expression exactly as I then began to finally explain what "taking care of it" really meant.

They both had quietly purred with amusement when I mentioned that I used Squirrelflight as bait.

And then, just as I had when I'd explained the whole thing to my family, I concluded with how I'd gone about Ashfur's trap, and then how Snowstorm had jumped in to help, giving the fox-hearted Dark Forest spirit the killing blow.

Resulting in his second death... I thought, letting out a long sigh as I finally closed my story to two of my closest friends. *Good gosh, that's not going to set in for days and days. Heck, it's never going to set in!*

I then watched, simply purring with amusement through the silence as both Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw stared back at me, looking utterly stunned.

Brambleclaw was shaking his head slowly, his amber eyes thoughtful and full of admiration. He opened his mouth several times to speak, but with the first few times, his attempt at speaking failed him.

But don't worry, he eventually got there. Somewhat. "Well I'll be..."

he breathed, trailing off only after a few words.

"It blows your mind, doesn't it?"

I flicked my ears, peering past Brambleclaw to see that my mate, Thornclaw, was approaching the three of us, seemingly finished with his task of assisting his injured Clanmates in getting to the medicine den.

A wave of warmth rushed through me as the golden brown tabby tom came into my sight, and then ran up to me and pressed his pelt against mine. "Once I've gotten over the fact that she leaped into danger like this all by herself..." my mate then murmured, giving me a light nudge on the shoulder and gazing down at me, his gaze full of affection and teasing, "I think I'll be proud of her."

I looked back up at my mate lovingly, giving him a lick on the cheek. "Oh, please! You're proud of me already!" I joked. "But... I suppose that once I've gotten over the fact that you put yourself into danger by going after me... I think I'll be appreciative of you."

Then, as Thornclaw let out a snort and rolled his eyes, I nuzzled his cheek with my muzzle as I was overwhelmed with love for the grumpy-mouse that was also my long-time mate. *I'm already crazy appreciative of him. I don't know how he's put up with me after all of these seasons,* I thought, a purr rising in my throat as Thornclaw's familiar scent flooded into my nose. *And what's funny is when we first met, he seemed to be the difficult one out of the two of us.*

I then sniffed as I pulled my muzzle away from my mate to meet his gaze. *Well, he was. He heard the word "kittypet" associated with me, and wanted nothing to do with me at first,* I thought, amused. *But now... he refuses to not stand by my side, even when I try to push him away for his own safety.*

I then let out a purr as I leaned into Thornclaw. And having a mate like him by my side is almost more unbelievable than Ashfur being gone for good.

"I can't even imagine how much planning that took, how many moons this has all been in the making..." Squirrelflight then

murmured after a few moments, breaking into my thoughts. I looked up at her to meet her still amazed, bewildered green eyes. "You made it all sound so easy!"

Well... in a way, I suppose it was easy, I thought as I purred with amusement and gave Squirrelflight a shy shrug. *If I've learned anything with all that I've gone through, it's that anything, anything can seem easy as long as you have the determination to do it.*

I then let out a snort, slowly shaking my head to myself. *And, well... I* definitely *did, I'd like to think.*

"If you did all of this... how come I saw you here in camp earlier, battling the Dark Forest spirits with us?" Brambleclaw then murmured, his eyes full of genuine curiosity. "Why didn't you leave straight away?"

I let out yet another sigh, glancing out towards the clearing, where many of the cats of ThunderClan continued to swarm about. "I may have had a Dark Forest cat to take care of..." I began to answer, my voice full of laughter. "But that wasn't going to stop me from fighting alongside my Clanmates."

I then looked back at Brambleclaw as I heard him purr with amazement, and I watched as he seemed to exchange another astonished glance with Squirrelflight, and then Thornclaw. "Wow, I... wow."

He then looked back at me, his eyes wide with admiration. "That's a selfless act if I've ever seen one, Lilypetal. One of a true warrior," he then meowed, his head nodding slowly as I looked down timidly, overwhelmed by the praise. "You know, I-"

"Brambleclaw?"

Brambleclaw then flicked his ears, peering past Squirrelflight, Thornclaw, and me to watch Sandstorm, who was padding up to him from where she'd also been grieving for Firestar.

The pale ginger she-cat's gaze remained on her beloved mate, and didn't leave him until she came to a stop just in front of

Brambleclaw. "I know that you, along with every one of us, have scarcely had time to process all that has happened tonight, one of those things being..."

I then felt my own heart seem to crack in two as the older she-cat broke of her words for a moment, wincing as she looked over her shoulder. "...the loss of our leader," she then continued, her gaze softening as she looked back at Brambleclaw. "But..."

I then felt a chill run down my spine as Brambleclaw slowly closed his eyes, giving a slow, single nod. "But it's time for me to assume the position, isn't it?"

Sandstorm slowly nodded back at him. "Firestar chose you as deputy all of those moons ago for a reason, didn't he?" she purred.

She then flashed Brambleclaw one last sympathetic, encouraging look as he seemed to fall speechless, as if the thought of becoming leader had not even occurred to him at all. And simply watched, wide-eyed as Sandstorm took a step back, lifting her chin and looking out towards the camp clearing as she called out, "Bramblestar!"

Her Clanmates quickly heard her triumphant yowl, and quickly joined her, calling out their new leader's name as they all turned to face Brambleclaw.

Or should I say, *Bramblestar* now. "Bramblestar! Bramblestar!"

I joined into the cheering without hesitation, and watched happily as Squirrelflight let out a purr and ran up to flank her mate, licking his cheek. Bramblestar, who had seemed to nervously turn around the face his Clan, took a deep breath as the cheers finally died down, as if he were bracing himself to have to speak.

"I will honor my ancestors in StarClan, but not those who have ever walked in the Dark Forest," the new leader finally meowed, his demeanor suddenly becoming more certain, and more confident as he straightened up and let his fur lie flat. "Guide my steps wisely, warriors of the past."

He then lowered his head from where he'd glanced up at the dawn sky. "And warriors of now."

I found myself nodding with approval as I stared back at Bramblestar. *Spoken like a true leader,* I thought, leaning into Thornclaw, feeling more comforted as cheers rose for the dark brown tabby once more. *Yes, things will be very different from now on, but certainly no worse.*

As the yowls faded once again, my gaze then fell on the gray tabby pelt of Jayfeather, who had padded up to Bramblestar, and was touching his tail to his foster father's spine. "It's time to choose a deputy."

I couldn't help but begin to well up with curiosity and anticipation as I watched Bramblestar give Jayfeather a nod, and then walk beneath the Highledge, scanning his amber eyes around the camp clearing.

I couldn't help but also flit my eyes around excitedly, beginning to make my own guesses as I eagerly awaited to hear who the new ThunderClan leader was going to pick. *Oh my goodness, there are so many great prospects!* I realized. *Brackenfur would be great...*

I then glanced up at my mate next to me. *I have no doubt that Thornclaw would be absolutely fantastic too.*

I then began to scan my gaze around the camp once again, my heart almost feeling heavy with the weight of Bramblestar's decision. *Squirrelflight, Brightheart, or Ivypool, maybe? Great StarClan, I can't decide!*

I then began to shake my head slowly. *Anyone in this Clan would be wonderful,* I realized. *I'd hate to be making this decision right now.*

"Why don't Tigerstar's son and Scourge's daughter form an alliance?"

I completely froze in my place, and all of the sudden, everything around me seemed to become a blur.

And in that moment, I was pretty darn sure that Ashfur had given me a brain injury, *because the words I've just heard don't seem real.*

I jerked my head back towards Bramblestar to see that, to my complete shock, that he was looking back at me, his eyes thoughtful and full of mischief. Around me, I could feel every single pair of eyes in the camp quickly shift to look over at where I stood.

I could be sure that Bramblestar's words had been real now, but nevertheless, they seemed too shocking to be true. "Does Scourge have another daughter in this Clan?" I meowed, my voice coming out a lot weaker and shakier than I'd wanted.

As purrs of amusement began to spread through the camp, Bramblestar shook his head back at me, his eyes full of certainty and humor. "Well, even if he did, she's not the one I'm talking about."

My legs began to shake, so violently that I was sure that I was going to lose my balance and crash right into Thornclaw. "Are you sure?"

Bramblestar sniffed, taking a step closer to where I stood. "I'm pretty sure," he then purred. "You were the one I was just speaking with, right? The one who told me all about what she went through tonight just to protect her Clanmates?"

Bramblestar then tilted his head to the side. "The one who always speaks her mind, trying to make things right? The one who has shown constant loyalty and dedication from the moment that she stepped into this Clan as a kittypet?" He then sniffed, lashing his tail as he gave me a single nod. "Yep, I've got the right one."

Beside me, Thornclaw was pressed deep into my fur, giving my ear comforting licks as a purr rose in his throat. I pressed back into my mate, taking comfort in his touch as I stared back at Bramblestar. "You're kidding," I then replied, my voice thick.

Although I felt pretty sure of that, Bramblestar's amber gaze said something completely otherwise. *Did... did he really just choose me to be the deputy of ThunderClan?*

And sure enough, he dipped his head to me in reply. "No, I'm not kidding," he then meowed to me, his eyes glowing with amusement. "My teasing at the end of your warrior assessment was as far as I

would go."

He then slowly lifted his head, and the camp seemed to grow completely silent with his next words. "So, what do you say?"

Although I'd been able to utter just a few words, I now found myself completely speechless as I turned my head to look back at my Clanmates. And with Bramblestar's choice, I honestly expected to hear snorts and hisses of disapproval, and see many pairs of eyes blazing with anger and disbelief. But instead, to my total bewilderment, many of their eyes were warm, and they looked just as certain as their new leader did. *No way... no way.*

I then found myself meeting the gazes of my friends - Squirrelflight, Leafpool, Whitewing... all of them looked nothing but proud.

And as if that wasn't already enough to make myself crumble into countless pieces with emotion, I lastly looked back towards my family, who were just a few tail-lengths from where Thornclaw and I currently stood.

Wrenpaw, Lightningpaw and Emberpaw were staring back at me, wide-eyed as they whispered excitedly to each other. Well, Wrenpaw and Lightningpaw were, anyway; Emberpaw was kneading her paws into the ground, her hazel eyes blazing with pride as she seemed to be suppressing her purrs.

Goldenshine and Swiftflight were standing just beside my second litter. Swiftflight stood tall, looking calm and stiff as he always did, but his gray-blue eyes were warm as he looked back at me, and he pulled Cherrypaw closer to him as she flanked his own fur.

Goldenshine, who was on her son's other side, was blinking her gray eyes open and closed, but it seemed that no matter how hard she tried, they were just as glossed over, glittering with happiness each time she opened them again. "Oh my StarClan, Dustystorm," I just barely heard her whisper as she leaned into her mate. "No one else deserves this more."

I had to shut my eyes for a moment as emotion welled up into my own eyes. *The fact that any cat would think that I'm worthy enough of*

this position is an honor already.

And lastly, I turned to look at the cat still standing beside me, and I felt my heart practically melt as I met Thornclaw's pale blue eyes. "Thornclaw, I..."

My mate looked as if he was going to explode with love and pride as he quickly wound his tail around mine, squeezing it tightly with his own. "Goldenshine is right," he whispered back to me, his eyes glittering. "No one deserves this more."

He then held my gaze for a few heartbeats before taking a deep breath, releasing his tail from my own, and taking a few pawsteps back. "Go on," he then urged me, his gaze gentle as he nodded towards the Highledge.

I stared lovingly back at my mate for a few moments more, continuing to be overwhelmed with love for him, before looking up towards the sky, where the stars of Silverpelt still barely lingered.

Are Mistpelt, Snowflight and Firestar watching me from up there?

I then looked back down, feeling myself well up with certainty as I met Bramblestar's gaze once again. *Yes, they are.*

In that very same heartbeat, all of the power, strength, and assurance from those StarClan cats seemed to flow into my own pelt as I finally took a pawstep, and then several pawsteps - *shaky* ones, forward towards the new ThunderClan leader.

And I still felt every single cat's eyes on me as I finally came to a stop, taking a deep breath and putting my tail on Bramblestar's shoulder.

"I accept, Bramblestar," I meowed, this time my voice coming out as clearly and confidently as I'd hoped it would. And I then couldn't help but let out a squeal of excitement as it all began to set in - what I was being chosen to do. "I... I accept, I most definitely accept!"

I then took yet another deep breath, attempting to calm myself as I heard more purrs come from behind me. "I will do absolutely

everything in my power to serve you, and this Clan, to the best of my ability. I won't let you down." *At least, I hope that I won't!*

Bramblestar almost seemed to hear my uncertain thoughts. "I know that you won't, Lilypetal," he meowed, shaking his head slowly. He then sniffed, giving me a wink. "I chose you for a reason, didn't I?"

Chosen as deputy, I thought to myself, hardly able to believe that these very thoughts were crossing my own mind. *Chosen as deputy! What?!*

I began to shake my head slowly right back at him. "Oh my goodness..." I breathed, the shock of this entire situation rising up inside of me once again. "Oh, Bramblestar, I once again question if you've got the right cat."

"Oh, I do, Lilypetal," Bramblestar replied, his voice full of laughter. "I didn't make this decision lightly."

I then simply stared back at him, wide-eyed as he began to explain himself. "As time has gone on, as you would guess, thoughts of becoming leader in the future definitely cross my mind every so often, and..." He then trailed off for a moment, flicking my ear with his tail. "Let's just say that you've been on my mind to possibly replace me for quite a while."

He then nodded out towards the forest. "And after tonight, what you told me you did for this Clan, doing whatever it took to help us get rid of a very dangerous cat..." he went on, his gaze slowly shifting back towards me. "It was almost as if StarClan were giving me a sign to set that prospect into stone."

"I... wow... " I choked out, completely blown away by the leader's praise. "I have no words..." *Well, no words except to say that I have no words.* "Thank you, Bramblestar," I then purred, keeping the tip of my tail on the tabby's shoulder. "I am immensely honored."

Bramblestar continued to stare back at me, his amber eyes now full of amusement and concern. "Are you alright?" he then meowed, flicking his gaze towards his shoulder. "Your tail is trembling."

"Yeah?" I breathed, finally pulling my tail away. "Well, it will be for a while!"

Bramblestar let out a *mrrow* of laughter, touching his own tail to my flank. "I'll admit that I wasn't much calmer when Firestar chose me as deputy," he purred to me. "It goes away after about a day's time."

Heck no. My tail is going to be trembling until the day I join StarClan, I thought jokingly as Bramblestar flashed me one last warm look, and then proceeded to pad ahead to speak with Jayfeather, who was waiting for him just beside the camp entrance.

For a moment, I simply stood where I was, almost still feeling completely certain that this was all some sick joke. *I... I can't believe that I have this honor.*

Everything still seemed to be one strange, amazing blur as my Clanmates ran up to me, giving me their congratulations. *And I can't believe that that other cats believe that I should have this honor.*

I tried to thank each and every cat as fully and kindly as I could, having to break past my own shock and disbelief at this entire situation. *I might as well get some practice at having to speak and deal with many cats at once, huh?*

I then flicked my ears, actually feeling a pang of nerves as I then met the amber gaze of Spiderleg, who had padded up with Dustpelt as he'd congratulated me.

And I'm also going to have to deal with a good sum of cats probably not approving of me.

I stared sympathetically back at the black and brown tom. "Hm, I'm sure that this isn't very fun for you, is it?" I murmured to him as I began to shift my paws back and forth.

There were a few moments of silence as I awaited the tom's answer. I was completely surprised when Spiderleg actually seemed to be hesitating to answer, and eventually he let out a sigh and rolled his eyes. "It wasn't the most horrible choice that he could have made."

I couldn't help but let out a gasp, hearing words like this from one

of the most stubborn, closed-minded cats in the forest. "What?" I exclaimed to the tom. "You really mean that?"

"Unfortunately, I do," Spiderleg muttered, not keeping his gaze on me as he gave a single lash of his tail. "And unfortunately, this Clan continues to be proven wrong about kittypets... because yet another one will be leading our Clan, it appears."

I purred with amusement and gave a shrug. "I'll take it!" I meowed cheerfully. "Thank you, Spiderleg. But trust me, I'm just as floored as you are!" I then gave him a flick on the ear. "I'll try not to be too bossy!"

I then continued to purr as Spiderleg gave another roll of his eyes, letting out a huff as he turned around and pelted off. *Ha, he's used up all of his kindness and vulnerability for the day, it seems!*

Then, just as the brown and black tom disappeared from my sight, I let out a startled yelp as I suddenly felt a pelt practically fly into mine, and several of them quickly joined as squeals erupted into the air.

My heart quickly began to pound with warmth rather than alarm as I looked down to see the golden brown tabby pelt of my daughter, Goldenshine, pressed up against me. "Oh, mother!" she purred as she dug her muzzle into my shoulder.

"Emberpaw, Wrenpaw, can you believe it?" Lightningpaw exclaimed from where he leaned against my other shoulder. "Mother is the deputy of ThunderClan!"

Emberpaw let out a squeal as she leaned against my chest. "Oh, the bragging we're going to do at the next Gathering!"

"Brag?" Wrenpaw then meowed, worming his way between his two siblings, his pale blue eyes blazing with excitement as he looked at them back and forth. "We're going to completely rub in the other apprentices' faces!"

The largest purr was rising in my throat as I used my tail to pull all but one of my kits closer. *Oh, my precious kits... you're all the*

motivation that I need to want to be the best possible deputy for this Clan.

I then rose my head from where I'd been staring lovingly down at my four lovely offspring, and my heart began to well up with even more love as I looked ahead to meet the pale blue gaze of my mate. *And that tom right there is the rest of it.*

I watched as Thornclaw slowly padded up to me, his gaze not leaving mine. "So, when we first met..." I whispered to him once he'd stopped just in front of me. "When you scoffed at me about kittypets not being welcomed in ThunderClan, did you ever think that you'd end up taking orders from me?"

Thornclaw rolled his eyes, letting out an amused huff. "Oh, Great StarClan, don't even go there!" he purred as he padded up to wrap his tail around me and the kits, licking my head. "I suppose that I didn't think that I, or the rest of this Clan, would ever get that lucky."

"Oh, goodness," I breathed as I leaned into Thornclaw's chest, pulling our kits even closer. *Lucky... I sure hope that this will be seen as good luck.*

I then took a deep breath, lifting my head to look up at the sky, which was now slowly starting to lighten as the sun rose. *Foxdung to that; I'm going to make sure that it's good luck for this Clan,* I told myself. *Fending off Ashfur was just the beginning. Now, I'm more than ready to protect and serve this Clan - showing as much loyalty and dedication as I did before - as their deputy.*

Epilogue

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

My eyes shot open as I heard the loud chirps of the first morning birds, their cries escaping the trees out in the forest and flooding straight into my ears. I immediately had to squint and screw my eyes shut again as the bright rising sun shone through the bramble walls and into the warriors den. I could feel its warmth falling onto my back, and I could already picture the large rays of light beaming through the woven ceiling above me.

Well, good morning to me, I guess!

I shifted myself slightly in my moss nest, extending my front and back paws out into one long stretch as my mouth opened up into a yawn.

I then slowly but surely stood up, scanning my eyes around the den. Every single nest was still filled, and the snores and soft breathing of my Clanmates filled my ears. *While it would probably be strange for any other cat in this den to wake up before anyone else... it's what I'm used to, now!* I realized.

I then let out a sigh as I looked back down at my nest, where my mate, Thornclaw, was still fast asleep. I couldn't help but stare lovingly down at his golden brown tabby shape for just a few heartbeats, watching as his flank rose and fell in his slumber.

But as adorable as his sleeping-self was, I eventually lowered my head down and gently began to nuzzle him awake as I rubbed my muzzle against his cheek.

It only took a few moments for me to finally succeed, and I began to purr at the first sight of one of my mate's pale blue eyes opening. "Rise and shine, sleepy-mouse!" I then whispered to him, lightly pawing his shoulder.

Thornclaw blinked his eyes open and closed just a few times before stretching out himself. He then stood up, his eyes full of affection as he gave me a lick on the cheek. "Hm, can't stand to start off a morning without me?"

I let out a sigh as I stared back at my mate. "Oh, I suppose that I can't," I purred back at him. I then sniffed as I gave a single lash of my tail. "Well, and I also have you leading the dawn patrol this morning."

Thornclaw blinked, feigning extreme bewilderment as his eyes glowed with amusement. "Oh, I see how it is, O great deputy!" he then whispered to me, his voice full of laughter.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes with those words. "Goodness gracious, how long are you going to be calling me that?" I meowed, beginning to lead my mate out of the warriors den. "You've called me that more than my own *name* since I became deputy a few quarter moons ago!"

"That's true, I have!" Thornclaw then purred, his expression full of mischief as I looked back at him. "And I'll stop once *you* stop giving me that adorable, frustrated face that you make every time I say it."

"Hm, you win," I then sighed, pretending to reluctantly give in as I stopped in my travel, standing just in front of the fresh-kill pile. I turned around to face Thornclaw, tilting my head to the side and flashing him a pleading, innocent look. "If I offer to share a chaffinch with you, will that get it to stop for at least a full day?"

Thornclaw paused as well, staring back at me through teasing, but loving pale blue eyes. And after a moment, he let out a small grunt and padded up to join me. "Hm... I'll consider it," he murmured, settling down on the ground as I pulled said chaffinch from the pile of prey and lied down just beside him.

And as I bent down to take my first bite of the plump, colorful bird, enjoying this meal with my mate as I did every morning, I felt myself feeling more refreshed, well-rested, and ready for another day. *Ready for another day as ThunderClan's deputy!*

I was still getting used to the incredibly new routine; having to get up at the crack of dawn, knowing exactly how that day was going to run, and what cats were doing what, had been incredibly daunting. It *still* was, and I still had a lot to learn.

But I was slowly getting the hang of it, or, at least I tried to tell myself that. *But I just have to remind myself of why I'm having to work so hard in the first place,* I told myself, my heart welling up with pride as I thought about what a privilege it was to be able to help my Clanmates in the way that I now was. *And I've received nothing but encouragement and support from my Clanmates, and thank StarClan for that!*

I then flicked my gaze affectionately back up at Thornclaw as I took another bite of the chaffinch. *And I've also received some silly nicknames, but I can live with that.*

Each morning since I'd become deputy, Thornclaw and I would get up before anyone else, grabbing a quick meal before both of our days begun, and I had to leap into the action of the day. *Sharing a meal with the love of my life*, I thought, exchanging an affectionate glance with Thornclaw as I pushed the chaffinch in his direction. *The perfect way to begin my day.*

But unfortunately, our meal quickly came to an end as two figures emerged from the warriors den - Squirrelflight and Spiderleg, who I had chosen to accompany my mate on the dawn patrol.

I let out a sigh, glancing back at my mate to see that he had also noticed the two other warriors. "And there's the rest of the dawn patrol," he muttered, standing up and taking a pawstep forward so that he could touch his nose to mine. "It looks like I'll be heading off."

I pressed my nose back, not being able to feel the slightest twinge of regret. *It's times like this that make me realize just how much I hate sending you off early,* I joked to myself. "Alright, Thornclaw," I whispered to him, pulling away so that I could meet his gaze. "See you at sunhigh for our hunting trip?"

"Of course," Thornclaw meowed softly as he stared tenderly back at

me. "I love you."

"I love you too," I purred to Thornclaw, standing up and giving him one last lick on the cheek. "I'll see you soon!" *Our hunting trip can't get here fast enough!*

I then pulled away, watching as Thornclaw flashed me one last warm look and ran ahead to join his patrol. And with a single flick of his golden brown tabby tail, he then led them out of the ThunderClan camp and through the camp entrance.

I then flicked my ears, turning back towards the camp clearing as I began to hear the rustles and meows of several cats. And sure enough, I looked over my shoulder to see that many of my Clanmates were beginning to flood out of their dens - yawning, stretching, and bracing themselves for a new day.

And it's just been days since we battled evil spirits, lost some our beloved Clanmates, and even lost our leader, I realized, shaking my head in amazement as I watched the cats of ThunderClan make their way into camp. *Yet we're all still here, ready to help and serve each other. Firestar would be very proud.*

And not to my surprise at all, one of the first cats that came into my sight, ready to "help and serve", was a certain dark gray tabby she-cat with white patches bursting from the apprentices den.

I couldn't help but shake my head and purr with amusement as this she-cat skidded to a halt just in front of me. "Good morning, Lilypaw!" I greeted my apprentice.

The younger cat's eyes blazed with eagerness and excitement as she looked back at me. "Good morning, Lilypetal!" she purred in reply. "I woke up early this morning, and couldn't fall back asleep, so I thought I'd see if we could go out training early?"

I tilted my head to the side, attempting to hide my eagerness and excitement that quite honestly equated hers. "Hm... well..." I murmured, pretending to contemplate for just a moment before giving an enthusiastic flick of my tail. "Nothing wrong with an early day, Lilypaw! That's fine by me."

I then lashed my tail towards the fresh-kill pile. "Why don't you grab something to eat while I set up this morning's patrols? Then, we'll be off!"

Lilypaw let out a gasp, her eyes widening, and then proceeded to give me several eager nods. "Okay!" she exclaimed just before trotting over to the heap of prey. "See you soon!"

"See you soon!" I called back to her, then bringing myself back into focus as I scanned my eyes around the camp. *Okay, the dawn patrol has been sent out,* I told myself, letting my gaze rest individually on each of my Clanmates. *But we should probably replenish the fresh-kill pile and send out some cats to hunt. But who to send, Lilypetal?*

Luckily, it didn't take me long to answer my own question as three different pelts caught my eye. *Ah-ha!*

I stood up and pelted ahead towards the three cats of my second litter. "Wrenfeather, Lightningstrike, Emberheart?" I called out to them, touching my nose to each kit as I ran up to meet them. "Would you three possibly be up for some hunting?"

I then gave Lightningstrike an affectionate flick on the ear with my tail, watching as he blinked his yellow eyes open and closed several times over. "I know that you all are probably still tired from your vigil a few nights ago, but-"

"No, mother, that's completely fine!" Emberheart quickly cut in, shaking her head quickly as if to get rid of all fatigue. She then turned to look at her two brothers. "We're up to it, aren't we?"

Wrenfeather let out a snort beside her. "Well, I'm certainly not just going to lie around in my nest when hunting needs to be done."

Lightningstrike shook his head just as his sister had, and then proceeded to lift his chin and give me a single definitive nod. "Yep, we're on it!" he meowed to me, and after I gave him an appreciative lick on the cheek, the black tom began to lead his two littermates out of camp. "Come on!"

I then watched, my heart welling with pride as Lightningstrike

stepped back, letting Wrenfeather and Emberheart pass through the camp entrance first. He then seemed to glance towards the warriors den for a moment, his eyes gleaming before following his siblings out of camp.

I followed my son's gaze to see that Snowstorm was currently emerging from the den, the dark gray pelt of Swiftflight just behind her. "Great StarClan," she purred back at her friend. "I cannot believe that you've actually done this every morning that you wake up before Cherryfall does."

Swiftflight stared at his friend, his gray-blue eyes narrowed. "Have you been counting?" he muttered.

"Well, you've done it often enough," Snowstorm then replied, watching in with humor in her eyes as Swiftflight brushed past her and ran ahead towards the fresh-kill pile. "She may be a new warrior, but she knows how to retrieve prey from the fresh-kill pile herself, you know."

"That's not the point, you mouse-brain!" Swiftflight then hissed, bending his head down to lift a shrew from the pile of prey. "I know that she could get it herself, but..." His initially annoyed glance then softened as he set his prey down, and looked back towards the warriors den. "I just like to have it ready for her when she wakes up."

Snowstorm stared back at Swiftflight, her blue eyes now gleaming with pride and admiration as she sighed. "Well... I suppose that I can't complain about my best friend being good to his mate."

She then gave Swiftflight a nudge before running towards the elders den, where Brackenfur and Dustpelt were doing some last-minute repairs. "I'll see you later!" she then called back to her friend. "We're racing out in the forest again!"

Swiftflight snorted, giving a lash of his tail. "Only a sore loser would be that insistent!" His expression then quickly went from teasing and amused, to soft and tender as he averted his gaze back towards the warriors den.

I followed my kin's gaze to see that Cherryfall, who had become a warrior just a couple of moons ago along with her brother, Molewhisker, was now making her way out into the camp clearing. Her amber eyes grew warm as they fell on where Swiftflight sat at the fresh-kill pile. She quickly ran up to join him, touching her muzzle to his before settling down beside him.

I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming amount of pride as I watched the two young warriors begin to share the shrew. *Swiftflight really is doing all that he can to make Cherryfall happy, isn't he?* I thought as I shook my head in amazement. *Great StarClan, how that son of my daughter's has changed. And luckily, it was definitely for the better.*

"Great StarClan, Goldenshine!"

Speaking of my daughter, apparently...

I then flicked my ears, slightly alarmed, and I shifted my gaze towards the medicine den to see my daughter, Goldenshine, padding through its bramble screen with a big smirk on her face.

Jayfeather followed just behind her, his blind blue eyes blazing with frustration. "For the last time, I am not going to arrange my herbs by how stinky they are!"

Goldenshine gasped, whipping herself around to face the medicine cat. "Oh, come on! Have you even given it any thought?" she pleaded. "What if we were in some emergency, and you needed someone unexperienced to grab some herbs for you? You could just say, 'I need some elder leaves - they're the really weird-smelling ones near the back'!"

"Sure," Jayfeather muttered as he rolled his eyes. "But then they'd have to take an extra few moments to sniff through *all* of the herbs that I've put near the back!"

"Well, clearly the current system isn't very helpful," my daughter went on, lashing her tail back towards the medicine den. "You asked me to get you some parsley the other day, and it took me forever to find it in there!"

Jayfeather snorted. "I don't think that was because of the arrangement of the herbs."

Goldenshine then groaned, rolling her gray eyes. "I think that Snowflight would love my idea!"

Jayfeather then let out a sigh, turning around to walk back into the medicine den. "I think that Snowflight would be on my side with this one."

My daughter watched the gray tabby tom go for a moment, and then proceeded to whip herself around and pad away from the den. "I'm going to ask Dustystorm what he thinks," she exclaimed, loudly enough to where Jayfeather would still be able to hear her. "I'm sure he'll think it's genius. Because it *is!*"

I stared back at my daughter, not being able to help but let out a quiet purr of amusement as I noticed Bramblestar leaping down from the Highledge out of the corner of my eye. I eventually looked back at him to see him looking back in the same direction, his amber eyes glowing with humor. "Everything alright over there?" he purred to me.

"Oh, yeah!" I purred back, giving the ThunderClan leader a shrug. "Just your typical Goldenshine and Jayfeather bicker of the day."

"Then it sounds like it's already been a pretty normal morning," Bramblestar observed, his voice full of laughter as he turned his head to look at me. "Is everything else going okay?"

I took a deep breath, then giving my leader a single sharp nod. "Just fine!" I replied cheerfully. "The dawn patrol and the hunting patrol that I sent out should be back well before sunhigh if there isn't any trouble. And if there is, I'll be out in the forest with Lilypaw to catch it."

Bramblestar nodded back at me, his gaze (luckily) now full of approval. "Wonderful," he replied, giving me a flick on the ear with his tail. I then watched as he looked over his shoulder, his gaze resting on the dark ginger pelt of Squirrelflight as she emerged from the Highledge and leaped down to the camp floor.

He then looked back at me, dipping his head in farewell. "Thank you, Lilypetal," he meowed, turning around to approach his mate, where she currently stood near the fresh-kill pile.

"Sure thing!" I called back to the ThunderClan leader as he sat down next to Squirrelflight, helping her to pick out the best catch for the two of them to share.

And simultaneously, I had to hold back a *mrrow* of laughter as another cat seemed incredibly eager to leave the fresh-kill pile, running up to meet me as quickly as they could. "Hi, Lilypetal!" Lilypaw purred, sitting down in front of me and wrapping her tail around her paws. "I'm ready to go whenever you are!"

I raised my eyebrows back at my apprentice. "Already?" I purred to her, glancing back towards the fresh-kill pile. "You ate that prey rather quickly!"

I then tilted my head to the side, cocking a single eyebrow as Lilypaw then shyly looked down to the ground and began to shift her paws back and forth. "Well..." she murmured more quietly. "I didn't finish it..."

I then burst into laughter, stepping forward so that I could give Lilypaw an affectionate lick on the ear. "Oh goodness, Lilypaw," I sighed to her, her enthusiasm continuing to blow me away each day that I trained with her. *I seriously wonder how ThunderClan dealt with it when I was an apprentice.* "You're lucky that I have the patrols sent out, so I'm ready to go too!"

I then pelted past the gray tabby she-cat, beckoning her forward with my tail. "Come on!"

I then proceeded to lead Lilypaw out into the forest, which was now brightly lit with the sun, that was now well-risen and high up in the sky. And although it was gracing the entire forest with its warmth as much as it could, a slight breeze shifted the trees - an indicator of leaf-fall, that would soon be approaching.

But the sun was still as bright and radiant as any day in the very heart of greenleaf, and for the first time since waking up, and since

sharing prey with Thornclaw, I was finally able to take a breath, and take in this beautiful morning.

Since I'd become deputy, sometimes moments like this would be the only time that I'd get to do something like that, considering how busy I'd become.

But I didn't care. In fact, I loved the hustle and bustle. I loved the fact that I was able to help my Clan in this way.

And also, I loved the fact that I was able to do all of it, knowing very well that Ashfur wouldn't be able to bring a burden to any of it anymore. *And because of that... I don't think I've ever felt so happy and free in my entire life. Even more so than when I first joined ThunderClan.*

I then quickened my pace, my heart leaping with nothing but good feelings, no fear or apprehension at all, as I led Lilypaw deeper into the forest, her smaller figure just a tail-length behind me.

But we weren't running for very long. Actually, I found myself coming to a complete stop with a certain landmark that caught my eye. I slowly shifted my gaze, letting my eyes rest on a certain, very special trail that led to a place that I knew very well.

And I quickly realized that I needed to follow that trail. "Lilypaw?" I meowed, flicking my gaze back towards my apprentice as she stared back at me in confusion. "Do you mind having a go at hunting all by yourself for just a moment?"

Lilypaw's blue eyes seemed to light up at that prospect. "Great StarClan, sure!" she squealed. But she quickly grew calm again, her expression revealing concern. "But how come? Is everything okay?"

I quickly flashed my apprentice a reassuring gaze. "Oh, don't worry; everything is perfect." Absolutely perfect. "I just want to check on something," I then explained, suddenly welling up with eagerness as I began to make my way up the trail. "I promise that I'll be right back. Stay in this area, and if any cat asks - I'm just a little ways up this tail at the greenleaf Twoleg nest!"

"Okay!"

I looked back at Lilypaw one last time, watching as she whirled around, surely eager to begin her search for prey, before continuing my travel on the dirt path ahead of me, the pawsteps that I needed to take feeling strangely familiar.

And just as I knew that they would, they led my straight to the greenleaf Twoleg nest that I had mentioned to Lilypaw - the very same one that I had once lived in many, many moons ago now.

But now, it carried a very different meaning to me than it did when I lived in it.

And I'd only been staring at its brick walls, and its white picket fence for just a few heartbeats when I heard rustles in the grass come from the trees just beside me.

Oh, dear.

I froze in my place, and I felt the fur on my back begin to rise. "Who's there?" I called out to the trees. "Lilypaw, is that you?"

"Lily*paw*?"

I whipped myself around to face the voice that I'd heard, and was completely shocked as I immediately recognized the black and white pelt of my brother, Oreo, emerge into the clearing.

His hazel eyes were gleaming with amusement as he padded up to meet me. "Uh, oh. You being second-in-command in your Clan hasn't made you crazy, has it?" he then meowed, his eyes narrowing. "You seem to be talking to a figment of your past self."

"Oh my goodness, Oreo! Hey!" I exclaimed, my heart welling up with so much excitement and happiness as I pelted up to the tom and touched noses with him. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing here?"

"Hey, Mistpelt isn't the only distant family member of yours that wants to stay connected with you!" Oreo purred, having been informed on the dreams that our mother had sent me beyond her

death. "I slipped away from my house, and found myself wandering towards the forest to see if I could run into you again."

He then sniffed, giving me a light nudge on the shoulder. "Wow... it went a lot better than anticipated."

I nudged my brother right back, a purr continuing to rise in my throat. "No kidding!" I exclaimed. I then let out a snort, nodding back towards the trail that I had arrived from. "And by the way, I wasn't talking to myself - Lilypaw is my apprentice! She and her siblings turned six moons old about a quarter moon ago."

Oreo stared back at me, his eyes full of humor and amazement. "Well, how about that? My sister isn't crazy!" he murmured. "But it sounds like ThunderClan is, considering that they gave you an apprentice with the same name as you."

Then, after the two of us shared a *mrrow* of laughter, Oreo flicked his ears and began to flit his eyes around our surroundings. "But anyway, what are you doing here?" he then asked me, nodding towards the Twoleg nest. "You're not one to look at a house as longingly as you currently are."

I let out another small purr of amusement, following my brother's gaze as he stared back at the nest. "And you'd be correct - I'm most certainly not, but..."

I then let out a sigh, finally being able to reflect on my motives for coming up here in the first place. "I don't know, I just... looking at a Twoleg nest doesn't necessarily have to disgust me, you know?" I meowed, speaking my thoughts out loud as they came to me.

I then flicked my ears as I tilted my head to the side. "I wanted to come up here to kind of... blow my own mind, I guess," I went on. "It's still so crazy to think that a Twoleg nest was all that my life was, at one point. And now..."

I then looked back at Oreo as I began to shake my head slowly. "Now, I help to lead a group of wild cats out in the forest." *Little kittypet Lily would once be so shocked to hear that I'd do something as little as jump over the fence...*

She had wanted to jump over the fence for so long, yet she had no idea just how much jumping over the fence would bring her once she did.

I actually found myself having to push down emotion as I let out a shaky sigh, giving my brother yet another nudge. "I'm telling you, Oreo - the life of a warrior is one like no other," I murmured to him teasingly. "There's a reason why I keep pestering you about joining it!"

Oreo let out a huff beside me. "Oh, I know, Lilypetal. But..." My brother meowed, hesitating slightly. "I also *don't* know, you know? I've definitely thought about it, but... I'm quite happy where I am."

I then watched as he shifted his gaze to look back towards the direction I assumed he'd come from. "And... well, it's just... nice," he went on after a moment. "I'd rather not leave everything that I already have as a housecat."

I couldn't help but let out a small purr of amusement, slightly humored by the fact that Oreo felt obligated to explain himself so much. "I completely understand," I reassured my brother as I put the tip of my tail on his shoulder. "I just like to try when I get the opportunity!"

I then had to hold back another purr as another thought crossed my mind - one that had sparked from Oreo's talk of his life in the Twolegplace, and one that had first come about just a few quarter moons ago. "But if you don't mind me asking..." I murmured after a moment. "What's so tough for you to leave behind?"

I then slowly began to pad in a circle around my brother, flashing him a very obvious, teasing look. "Your housefolk? The food? Your friends?"

I then paused. "Certain... *she-cats*, perhaps?" I then watched, amused, as Oreo flicked his ears, looking utterly bewildered as he stared back at me. "Mistpelt has informed me on certain things," I then muttered, winking.

Oreo let out a long, hoarse sigh, and closed his eyes. "Good gosh."

I took a step closer to the black and white tom, feeling as if I had to probe just a bit more despite my brother's obvious discomfort. "So... was Mistpelt correct?" I asked warily, my head tilting to the side. "Is there a certain pretty kittypet that's strutted into your life?"

Oreo gave the smallest shrug, breaking his gaze from mine to stare down at the ground. "Hm. Get back to me in a few moons, and then I'll update you on that."

I purred with amusement as I then wrapped my tail around my brother's back. Ah, the beginnings of falling in love with a cat... strange and exciting, but always extremely complicated.

I then stared ahead, my ears flicking with surprise as I nearly seemed to be blinded by something that the sun was reflecting on in the distance. Something that lied just beneath the white picket fence of the Twoleg nest. "Whoa..."

Oreo quickly lifted his head back up, clearly relieved by the change in subject. "What?"

I slowly stood up, beginning to pad towards the small object. "Great StarClan..." I murmured, staring in complete bewilderment as I almost instantly recognized the small woven piece of fabric. And connected to it, was the almost miniscule, shiny object that the sun had reflected against. *Is it really...?*

I then hesitantly lifted my paw, using it to grab the object off of the ground so that I could look at it more closely. "No way..." I breathed, my eyes slowly widening. "My old collar..." *I'd recognize that bright pink string and gleaming silver thing anywhere. I mean, it was wrapped around my neck for what felt like an eternity.*

Oreo trotted up to join me. "Your old collar?" he questioned, his hazel eyes wide with awe as he began to examine it closely. "The one you wore as a kittypet? What is it doing here still?"

I narrowed my eyes as I thought about my brother's question. "Well, I suppose that it's been here since..." I trailed off for a moment, still processing the fact that this object that represented a life of mine that now felt so distant, still existed. "Since I first decided to take it

off."

"Did you take it off the day that you left to go into the forest?"

I then sniffed, tilting my head to the side. "I didn't, actually... it was a few days before," I recalled out loud.

I then set the collar back down, taking a few pawsteps back so that I had a full view of not only the collar, but the fence and the Twoleg nest that stood behind it. "I just... I had a feeling that soon I was finally going to gain the courage to leap over this fence," I went on. "I had a feeling that something was going to change, and..."

I then lowered my gaze, looking down at the collar once again. "I suppose that taking off this collar represented what could be a new beginning, in a way."

I then looked back at Oreo, prepared for him to tell me that my words sounded absolutely crazy. *I mean, every kittypet that I spoke to in the past about my forest fantasies most certainly would have.*

But as I should have known he would, my brother simply stared back at me, his eyes glowing with admiration and awe. "Well, I'll be darned," he nearly whispered, just before snorting with amusement and lashing his tail towards the collar. "I'm sure you want to get rid of that old thing now, huh?"

I narrowed my eyes once again, shocked that I hadn't instantly wanted to agree with my kittypet brother. "You know, what?" I murmured after a few moments. "I don't think that I will."

I then turned away from my brother, looking back down at the collar once again as my heart began to well up with warmth. "It... it kind of reminds me of all that has changed for me, and it represents how I finally was able to ignore all of the teasing I received for wanting to leave my housefolk, and find the life that I'd been meant to live." *In a strange way, it's almost like Mistpelt's dreams...*

Both had done so incredibly much to remind me of how much I'd been able to grow once I'd finally had the courage to get past my own fears, not care what others thought, and let the determination

and desire that had been burning inside of me finally take over.

And with that determination, I brought it to ThunderClan, where I could definitely say that my life truly began. For the first time in my life, I found something, and someone... *many* someones, that I was passionate about, that I wanted to fight for.

Heck, I'd never even thought about fighting anything before I'd left my housefolk.

And now... I thought, my heart seeming to grow as I stared back at the Twoleg nest. *My passion has led me to find my home, find a family, so many friends - family and friends that I fought an evil fox-hearted demon to defend, and it's led me to be able to help lead them, I've found so many cats that I admire and look up to...*

The list could truly go on forever.

And it was all still there, waiting for me once I left this Twoleg nest. *How amazing is that?*

I then let out a long sigh, my eyes beginning to well up with emotion as I then stared down at my collar again. "Yes..." I nearly whispered, not even sure if Oreo would be able to hear my hoarse meow. "I'm definitely going to keep this right here."

THE END

Author's Note

Wow.

Wow.

As Lilypetal once said... holy pile of maggots.

I'll have you all know that I've already teared up several times since typing "THE END" on the Epilogue.

My goodness, you all - can you believe it? Here we are, this series finally being complete after SEVEN YEARS.

Many of you all haven't been here for seven years, and don't worry, I won't yell at you if you haven't, haha, but that's how long this series has been in the making.

And that's why the fact that this six book arc is finally done completely BLOWS my mind, and why the fact that it's over is hitting me so darn HARD.

I apologize in advance for this long story (the one I'm about to tell, not this six book arc, haha).

This series first came about when I was in early middle school, all because I was inspired by all of the Warrior cats fanfictions that I read here on Wattpad. I suppose, like Lilypetal, my determination and passion for the Warriors serious brought me to want to write my own, so I did. I created a she-cat named Lily, and she was going to interact with the canon characters during the Power of Three.

I created one book, it gained some reads, so then I made another. And then a third.

Shockingly, those three on their own - Kittypet Clanborn, Warrior Rising, and then Shifting Shadows, gained some popularity. Why? I'm not sure - because my writing, attention to detail, as well as actually taking the time of day to check for grammatical errors,

STUNK.

I'd originally planned to just make my series a three-book trilogy, but when I saw the (now baffling) attention that my books received, and wanted to write MORE. I began a fourth book - Darkness Awakens.

But unfortunately, my high school career didn't let me take that book very far, and with how busy I was, I unfortunately had to leave that fourth book stranded at Chapter 6, four years ago (oh my goodness I'm sorry don't worry everything that I'm saying eventually leads to a point I promise).

And to be honest, with this busy-ness, this series was thrown to the back of my mind, and whenever I did think about it, I dismissed it, pretty sure that I'd never get the chance to finish it off.

And from here, I've actually mentioned this in a previous author's note, but COVID-19 waltzing in is what finally brought me to return to it. I went into Wattpad, reread through all four books, and immediately thought. Holy cow... there is no HECKING way that I'm going to leave this series stranded anymore - I am going to flipping FINISH it.

And so, I did, and now, here we are, over a year after that very moment.

And I could not be more thankful and happy that I did. I seriously wonder how I could have possibly gone on in life like a normal youngun without finishing Lilypetal, Goldenshine, and Swiftflight's (Swiftkit's, if we're looking at the timeline) stories, haha.

And now that I finally have, it feels completely unreal. Like, it's barely processed. It's just so crazy to think about.

But the fact that I've finished it is only a part of what blows my mind - your endless support is the other part, and I am incredibly grateful for all of you <3

I mentioned that I had lots of support when I first began the series seven years ago, but once it went on a hiatus, and I returned to it

come COVID, it was basically like starting from square one all over again.

But I persisted, and like Lilypetal - I let my determination and passion for what I was doing lead the way. And sure enough, after I continued to push myself (and also after I edited the first three books...) so many of you guys came into the picture, and my heart feels so warm when I see and "hear" how much my writing inspires you, excites you, and just makes you want to read on. Your comments always put a smile on my face, and seeing the reads on my books rise so rapidly is still so wild to see.

You all are what further pushed me to finish off this series, and put out my best possible work for you all to read. Thank you, THANK YOU. Goldenshine is QUAKING at how heroic you all have been to my series.

And speaking of wanting to read on, that reminds me...

I've already heard from many of you lovelies that you are very sad that this series is ending. If it wasn't clear enough already - I am too. I don't want to see this all end, and I most certainly don't want to see Lilypetal, Goldenshine, and Swiftflight's stories end.

SO THEY'RE NOT FLIPPING GOING TO.

Okay, so while I'm definitely going to take a bit of a break from writing for a couple of months - my summer plans and my job currently stealing a lot of my time - I am MORE than certain, and MORE than eager to continue writing, so I AM.

I've already "talked" a lot, so I'm going to make my explanation of my future plans brief, but I plan on editing and finishing Mistpelt's Story (which currently still represents my middle school writing skills), and then giving each of my lovely protagonists (Lily, Golden, Swiftyboi) either a novella or super edition! I REFUSE for this last book to be the end of their stories, so I'm going to continue them very soon. I hope that you all are excited!

sigh

But anyway, I think that that is all that I have to say. Did I mention that I can hardly believe this is happening?

I almost want to keep typing so that I don't have to officially finish this book and mark it as complete. That will really make it all set in. But I suppose that I should learn from Swiftflight - hiding the truth and bottling up my emotions won't do ANYTHING for me.

Alrighty, you all. I'm going to let you go now. As I've said in my previous author's notes, if you've made it to this point, you are absolutely AMAZING, and I appreciate your support immensely.

Thank you, and I sincerely hope that you've enjoyed this journey as much as I have.

And finally,

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

Bonus Scenes?

Hello, hello, lovely readers!

I'm already popping back in here! Miss me? Haha.

First off, I must thank you all again for all of your *amazing* support on my finishing this book just earlier this week. You all are so gosh darn sweet!

So, long ago in my Author's Note (in the previous part of this book, haha), I mentioned that I would most DEFINITELY be writing more with Lilypetal, Goldenshine, Swiftflight and others in the near future. And that remains most *definitely* true...

Buutttt...

There's another SOONER writing project that's been brewing in my mind...

If you all have read any of the most recent books in the Warrior Cats series, you might be familiar with the bonus scenes that are included if you buy the book from Barnes and Noble (I think that's the only way you get those?).

They're basically little short stories put at the end of a Warriors book, and they're usually about 1-2 chapters! For example - the bonus scene after "The Apprentice's Quest" was Squirrelflight's coping with the idea of having kits, and the bonus scene for "Darkest Night" was Bumblestripe making advances on Dovewing, because... Bumblestripe.

And I've been thinking... as a sort-of celebration to finishing off my series, what if I added a bonus scene after each one of my books in my arc? I've already been getting writing withdrawals, so it is DEFINITELY something that I'd want to do very soon!

These bonus scenes would still involve my canon series + my OCS

universe, as my six books do, and could maybe show "exclusive" content almost - parts/moments of my series that weren't actually written out, or were only briefly mentioned, if that makes sense! For instance - how Oreo met his she-cat that keepings being brought up... hehe.

I already have a couple of ideas for bonus scenes in mind, **but if you all have a suggestion for a bonus scene you might like to see, feel free to let me know in any form that you'd like (in the comments, PMs, etc)!**

The bonus scene could be from any of my character's POVs - even someone as major as Lilypetal or Swiftflight again! Whatever you'd like to read about, and whatever you're curious about involving parts of this fanfiction series and these characters, feel free to let me know, and I'll definitely consider writing it as one of the bonus scenes! Since I have six books in this series, and each book will have one bonus scene, that means that there will be six in all!

I think that this would be SUPER fun, and I hope that you all think the same! I know that I, along with many of you, were sad to see this series end, and I know that this is most definitely appeasing me, haha! <3

But anyway,

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345